

== BUFFALO BILL'S FAMOUS FEAT! ==

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Buffalo Bill's Mascot; or, Death Valley Victim No. 13

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM

AUTHOR OF THE "BUFFALO BILL" NOVELS, "MERLE, THE MUTINEER," "MONTEZUMA, THE MERCILESS," ETC., ETC.



COLONEL MERRIAM AND THE OTHERS GAZED IN AMAZEMENT, FIRST AT BUFFALO BILL AND THEN AT THE SURGEON SCOUT.

Buffalo Bill's Mascot;

OR,

The Death Valley Victim No. 13.

A Romance of Desperadoes in Arizona.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE VALLEY OF DEATH.

JUST as the sun was sinking below the mountain horizon in Arizona, a horseman halted upon a ridge, which he had ascended from a trackless, barren plain, where neither bush, grass, tree or stream were visible, and gazed upon the scene there spread out before him.

"Is this one of those mirages of this wild land, of which I have heard so much, or is it in reality a scene of beauty, a fertile valley?" muttered the horseman as he sat upon his horse and gazed upon a beautiful valley spread out before him.

Beyond, far beyond, was a range of lofty mountains, and upon either side of him were the ridges of hills which formed the vale.

A river ran winding through the valley, with trees fringing its banks, and here and there were pretty parks, with meadow-lands and pretty bits of scenery to tempt the eye of one who loved nature.

"A far better place in which to spend the night, old horse, than what we had anticipated having, after our long and dreary ride across yonder desert.

"They say this spot is one to avoid, and the trappers call it Death Valley, while several of the scouts at the fort have named it the Valley of Jim-Jams.

"It is to leave all hope behind to enter here, to die without knowing why, and to see strange sights there is no accounting for, I have been told.

"Some say that the place is haunted by evil spirits, others that it is the abode of a demon race of Indians, and I know men avoid it as they would a pestilence.

"Well, that is just what brought me here, to solve the mystery, to know the truth or falsity of the tales I have heard, so we will press on, old horse, and find a camping-place for the night, for we dread the treeless, waterless desert behind us far more than all the evil spirits that may haunt this spot of beauty before us, do we not?

"Come, old pard, it is getting dark, so we must hunt a camp for the night."

So saying the horseman rode over the ridge, and making his own trail started down into the valley toward the river.

He was splendidly mounted upon a large, long-bodied, clean-limbed bay, whose every look indicated great speed and endurance, and his trappings showed that he was out upon an extended scout, as he carried a roll of blankets, bag of provisions and saddle-pockets well filled.

The rider was a man of majestic appearance, for he was as erect in bearing as an Indian, had a slender, wiry form, broad shoulders and rode like one whose life had been passed in the saddle.

A buckskin hunting-shirt, leggings stuck in the tops of high cavalry boots, and a broad-brimmed sombrero of terra-cotta hue completed his costume, which was striking and picturesque.

He had a lariat hanging upon one side of his saddle-horn, a repeating-rifle upon the other, and a belt encircled his waist in which there were two large revolvers and a bowie-knife.

If the general appearance of the man was striking, his face was more so, for his features were clear cut, formed in a refined and expressive mold, his eyes large, full of feeling and fire, and a mustache and imperial gave him a military look, which his bearing and seat in the saddle carried out.

His was a face to see and never forget, a face that a woman or a child would seek for protection from a wrong, and one which a man could look into and feel that he could rely upon him as a friend or a foe to the bitter end.

But why need I describe one who is known the world over, one whose name is

heard in every land and known as the name of a hero of heroes—Buffalo Bill.

Yes, it was Buffalo Bill, the scout, guide and Indian-fighter, and he was venturing alone, with night upon him, into the weird land known as the Valley of Death.

CHAPTER II.

THE SCOUT'S DISCOVERY.

BUFFALO BILL was well equipped, with his outfit for camping, his arms and horse, for a scouting expedition, a fight or flight.

He was a man who never knew fear, and, if brought face to face with death, would meet it with a courage that was indomitable, a smile of perfect resignation.

His career upon the frontier from boyhood had made him a man long before he got out of his teens and death had been daily by his side, sufferings, hardships and battling for life a part of his existence.

He had heard of this weird spot known as the Valley of Death, and was determined to visit it, where all others shunned it.

It was said to be a spot avoided by Indians in spite of its beauty of scenery, as though the abode of Evil Spirits, and red hunters and trappers who had gone there had wild stories to tell of how the very air was poisoned and deadly vapors arose from the ground to destroy those who camped there.

There were others born in superstition, who asserted that the valley was really haunted, and stories of how an emigrant train had once gone there to secure a home, glad to have found such an Eden of rest and beauty, and not one had ever left it alive to tell the tale of the fatality that had befallen them.

Trappers had gone there and never returned.

Indians, retreating from a raid and pursued by soldiers, had ventured into the valley by night and never reappeared.

Two or more scouts from the fort had never returned from trails they had gone upon, and they had been tracked to Death Valley.

So it was that the shadow of death hung over the valley, which was many miles in length, half a dozen or more in width, and as fertile as a garden.

Game going there was surely safe from the hunter, and so the scout expected to find in plenty there deer, antelope and other wild animals.

An oasis it was in a desert, for the barren, treeless, grassless, waterless plains of Arizona surrounded the fertile vale, with its stream that rose amid its hills and sunk from sight in the sandy lands beyond, its lakes, its springs and woodland.

The twilight deepened as Buffalo Bill descended the tree-dotted slope toward a distant peak, which his gaze had fallen upon from the ridge, and where he knew he would find in plenty wood, water and grass.

He had turned his field-glass upon the very spot he wanted for a camp, and though darkness was overtaking him he knew that he could find it.

"I am sorry we were not an hour sooner, pard, as we could have been camped before nightfall," he said to his horse, to whom he talked as though a human creature.

Down into the valley he went, and, reaching the stream, held along its banks for the distance of a couple of miles.

Night had come on, but the stars guided his way, and it was not very dark.

Reaching the little park he had observed from the ridge, he halted in a grove of cedars, unsaddled his horse, and staked him out upon the pasture land near by to feed.

Then he gathered some dry wood and soon had a bright fire burning.

He had no fear of Indians there, and so felt secure, for the red-skins would not move abroad at night, even if they were in the valley and saw the fire.

Filling his coffee-pot with water from the river, he got out his haversack of provisions and began to cook his supper.

This, when ready, he ate with the relish of one in the perfect vigor of manhood, afterward spreading his blankets among the cedars, throwing on more wood to brighten up the surroundings, that he might see about him.

In gathering more wood, Buffalo Bill strolled some distance from the fire, but where the rays of its light penetrated, and as

he turned with his arms full to retrace his way to camp, he suddenly stopped short.

The wood fell from his arms, and an exclamation of amazement broke from his lips.

And no wonder, for he had suddenly come face to face with an object that was enough to unnerve any one.

There before him, not a few feet away, suspended from a large limb hung a human form.

But the brave scout was only an instant in regaining his wonted calm mien, and, stepping quickly forward, he placed his hand upon the face of the hanging man, for his feet nearly reached the ground, while from his lips fairly rung the words:

"Great God! the body is still warm!"

CHAPTER III.

THE UNKNOWN.

BUFFALO BILL had often seen other men hanging in the timber, and he had known of many wild deeds of lawless bands and Vigilantes.

Yet this was a case that startled him, for it was coming upon a man hanged to a tree, in a valley said to hold no inhabitant, where only wild beasts roamed at will.

When his hand rested upon the face of the man he felt that the flesh was yet warm, that death, if he was dead, had been most recent.

He forgot his own danger, from those who had done the deed, in his anxiety about the unknown man, and quickly he drew his knife, severed the rope and bore the form to his little camp.

He then took the noose from about the neck, and saw that it had not closely encircled it, that there was a space under the chin which had prevented quick strangulation.

The hands were tied behind the back, and the feet also were bound, but they were quickly released.

Then the scout placed his ear over the heart of the man and felt that there was the slightest, faintest pulsation observable.

He got water from the stream and bathed the face and neck, and violently rubbed the chest and hands, while he forced a little whisky and water into the lips.

Thus he worked hard upon the man to bring him back from across the death-line, back into life.

It was some time before he felt that he would be rewarded, but, drawing off the boots he placed his feet close to the blazing logs, and having heated water in the coffee-pot he wet towels with it and bound them about the wrists, over the pulse, and laid them over the heart, while he continued to bathe the red and swollen neck.

At last the pendulum of life began its backward and forward swings, at first slowly, it is true, and with an irregular movement, yet showing that the struggle to live was exerting itself.

Steadily came the heart-beats after awhile, the pulses stopped their fluttering and became more regular, and a tinge of color came into the pallid face.

At last, after hours of work the lips parted with gasps, as the breath filled the lungs, then came the quivering of the muscles, a trembling of the eyelids, and the next moment the gaze of the man met that of Buffalo Bill.

There was a choking sensation, as the man strove to speak, and then came the words in a low, hoarse whisper:

"My God! why did you not let me die?"

"Must I endure all this agony again?"

"My good friend, you are not now with those who made you suffer.

"I found you hanging to a tree, and as your flesh was yet warm, I worked on you for hours to bring you back to life."

"Ah! you are not one of those demons who sought my life, and—"

He paused and the scout said gently:

"No, I am a scout from Fort Defiance, and coming into this valley to camp I found you here."

"Go! Go at once, for if you stay here you will meet your death."

"Go, I say!"

The man spoke excitedly, yet he did not move, as might have been expected.

His whole form seemed lifeless, paralyzed.

"I have brought you back to life and I

shall remain and care for you until you are able to leave with me.

"If danger comes, I shall meet it as best I can," was the reply of Buffalo Bill.

"No, you must depart from here and at once, for you do not know what your fate will be if you remain.

"You have brought me back to life, yet it would have been better had you left me to die, for see, I am helpless, my whole form seems paralyzed."

"That feeling is but temporary, the blood will soon circulate freely and you will be all right again."

"You think so?" eagerly asked the sufferer.

"I do."

"Heaven grant that your words may be true, for once again strong and myself, there is work that I can do.

"But, crippled, paralyzed as I now feel that I am, it would be far better had you allowed me to die."

"You will soon be yourself again, my friend, but who are you, may I ask?"

The man started at the question, gazed an instant fixedly into the scout's face and said in a low tone:

"You saved my life, and yet I cannot tell you who I am—I dare not.

"I am unknown to you, and so must remain until I have accomplished a duty that my life is now devoted to.

"Yes, I must remain unknown.

CHAPTER IV.

THE SCOUT'S RESOLVE.

BUFFALO BILL was impressed by the words and manner of the man, whom he had brought back to life.

He saw in the stranger one of fine physique, one whose form indicated great strength, endurance and activity.

He was clad in a suit of buckskin, even wearing moccasins, and his hat, which had fallen off, was made of fox-skin.

He had no weapons, and his clothing appeared to have been rifled, as though in search of plunder, for the pockets were turned inside out.

The man's face was heavily bearded, and he wore his hair long, falling half-way to his belt down his back.

The face, however, was a striking one, the eyes being large, expressive, and with a look in them that was strangely fascinating, though unreadable.

The teeth were even, white, and the nose straight and well-formed.

It was hard to guess the age of the sufferer, for though he hardly looked to be thirty, yet there were gray hairs upon his temples and he had the appearance of one more settled than had he lived only a score and a half of years.

His expression was strangely stern, save when he spoke, and then eyes and face lighted up to a remarkable extent.

Having seen that the man was nearly helpless, the scout felt that something must be done to aid him, and he said:

"Do you know this valley?"

"I do."

"Could you suggest a place where we might find a safe retreat for several days?"

"Yes."

"Then I will aid you into my saddle and we will go there."

"I can do nothing to aid myself."

"I see you cannot."

"How far away is the spot you have in mind?"

"Three miles."

"We will start at once then."

The scout made his preparations and raised the man to his saddle, but found that he was unable even to ride there.

Mounting behind him therefore he held him in the saddle, and, directed by the unknown, continued on down the valley for a mile.

Then he branched off to the right at a crossing of the streams, following in the bed of a small rivulet.

Up this he went for a mile or more, and came at last into a heavily wooded canyon where the little stream had its source.

Dark though it was Buffalo Bill discovered that there was grass in plenty all about, timber and water, with the canyon ending back in a lofty mountain range.

Directed still by the unknown he found a camping-place, and soon had a bright fire burning, which shed its light through the dark canyon.

"The very spot for a camp," he said, as he took his companion from the saddle and laid him upon his blankets near the fire.

"Yes, no one will come here, and the fire-light cannot be seen by night, nor the smoke by day, for it all goes into the dark holes you see in that cliff."

"Then, too, there are graves here by the score and not even a white man of this valley will come here."

"There are white men in this valley then?" quickly said the scout.

The unknown did not reply, and the scout did not press the matter, but kept up considerable thinking over what he had heard.

The horse was lariatd out to feed, wood was gathered, and the scout soon had a cheery camp of it.

He divided his blankets with his suffering comrade, and then they turned in for the couple of hours which yet remained of the night.

The sun was up when Buffalo Bill awoke.

His companion was sleeping soundly, so he did not disturb him, and after leading his horse to water, gathered a quantity of wood, getting the largest logs he could find, for he had decided what course he would pursue if the unknown was not much better when he awoke.

When at last the stranger did awake, Buffalo Bill found that he was able to use his hands and arms, but he yet seemed paralyzed from his waist down.

He gave him a hard rubbing, then breakfast, and said:

"See here, pard, I have come to a resolve about you."

"Yes."

"I have food enough to last you a few days, and what I will also need for myself, and I will build you a large fire of logs, put provisions within your reach, and start at once for Fort Defiance to bring you aid with all dispatch."

The answer fairly startled the scout, for the words came quickly:

"No, no, don't do that! Great God, no!"

CHAPTER V.

THE REFUSAL.

It was in vain that Buffalo Bill urged and argued, that the only thing he could do was to go to the fort for aid, for the unknown strenuously opposed it.

He said that the scout must leave him there, if he would go, but not to bring aid, for he did not wish any assistance from the fort, and would not consider the resolve of Buffalo Bill for a moment.

He positively grew excited in discussing it.

But Buffalo Bill felt that something must be done to save the man.

He was better, it was true, yet he needed medical aid, and must have it.

If he remained thus with him, it would be weeks before he could get away, perhaps longer, and he must return to the fort and report, for he had come away only on a short leave to make the trip alone into the Death Valley.

His provisions would not last more than a week longer, and there was nothing for him to do but to go.

The argument of the man that he should not, he could not but feel was from no dread of being left alone, but from some other cause, and he could not get any statement from him as to just what that reason was.

"Why do you not wish me to do that which reason tells me is best for both of us?" he asked, when the two were having dinner together that first day in the canyon camp.

"I would rather die than have you go."

"I am getting better, I feel it, I know it, and in a month will be myself again."

"But we have no food to last over a week, in fact hardly so long."

"Perhaps I may be well within that time."

"No, it would be impossible, though I do believe that a surgeon could soon bring you around."

"I can go to Fort Defiance and return

within four days, and I know the surgeon, or his assistant, will return with me, and I can bring an ambulance along also to carry you back."

"No, I will not go, and no army man must come into this valley."

"You know it is fatal to all who come here."

"I have heard so, but I am very much alive yet, and you seem to have lived here."

"And was hanged, but saved by you."

"No, not a soul must come here, not one."

"I will soon be well and then we can go our separate ways."

"You still unknown to me?"

"Yes."

"And why?"

"It must be so."

"That's all that I can tell you."

"You doubt me?"

"No, for I know you."

"Who am I?"

"Buffalo Bill."

"How do you know that?"

"Well, I have seen you before."

"I do not recall having met you before."

"Perhaps not, yet we have met, or at least I have seen you before, and I know you to be Buffalo Bill, Chief of Military Scouts at Defiance."

"I know you to be one to trust, if I dared do so, with life and all else."

"But I must remain unknown to you, and, just as soon as I am able, you must leave me, going quickly away from here and never returning to this Valley of Death again."

"Such an injunction simply increases my desire to know more of of the weird valley."

"Upon your life you must not."

"Be content with what you do know, that it is a weird place, that it has its mysteries, its graves with histories, yes, you see yonder the mounds that mark the resting place of half a hundred people whose real fate is unknown."

"Do you know what their fate was?"

"It matters not if I do, or do not, for they are dead, their story is told now only by those mounds," and he pointed up the canyon to where the eyes of the scout were resting upon a number of graves, not one of which was marked.

The scout arose and walked slowly toward the graves.

They were overgrown with grass, showing that they had not been recently made, and Buffalo Bill counted just forty-nine of them.

There was in the very center a space left vacant, as though by design, and it was large enough for another grave.

Here was driven a stake, which the scout bent over and looked at with interest, for upon it were just *forty-nine notches*, cut into it with a knife.

"How strange," muttered Buffalo Bill as he stood there gazing at the stake, placed in the vacant spot in the center of the graves.

"Well, my duty is plain, and that is to go to Defiance and get aid for this poor fellow, or he will die yet in this valley, where the mystery deepens to me every minute."

"Yes, I will arrange to slip quietly away to-night, leaving a note telling him I felt it my duty to go, and placing food enough to last him within his reach."

"Yes, I go to-night, that is certain."

With this determination formed, the scout walked about the canyon, taking it all in carefully, changed his horse to another spot further away, and began his preparations to quietly steal away from his unknown comrade when night should come on.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MIDNIGHT DEPARTURE.

BUFFALO BILL was anxious to make his arrangements for going in a way that would not attract the attention of his strange companion to what he intended doing.

Conning the matter carefully over, he felt that it was his duty to go for aid, as it was impossible for him to move the man from the camp, with him so helpless.

He could not hold himself in the saddle even, and the scout would not be able to ride a long distance holding him there, for the double duty on his horse would soon break him down.

He gave his companion a good supper,

and, while preparing it, divided his provisions, placing the largest quantity to one side for the use of the sufferer.

He managed to slip out one blanket also, and had placed his horse some distance away, so that his going would not be heard by the stranger.

By the twilight he wrote a few lines on a slip of paper and wrapped it on a stick which he intended to place where the unknown would see it upon awakening in the morning.

He made another effort to find out something about his strange companion, why he was in Death Valley, and what had brought him to that part of the country, as also who had been his foes.

But all questions proved in vain, as the unknown still insisted upon remaining a mystery to the scout.

When they had retired for the night, and the scout felt that his companion was sleeping soundly, he rolled noiselessly out from under the blankets, placed the provisions within reach of the other's hand and a revolver as well, with some ammunition, in case any wild beasts, discovering his crippled condition, might seek to attack him.

He then piled up near him a number of logs, which could be thrown upon the fire, to keep it burning, and which had been liberally supplied with wood by the scout, though the weather was not cold.

Then, with a glance of farewell at the mysterious man whom he had befriended, Buffalo Bill crept silently away out into the darkness beyond the firelight.

He carried with him a small bag of provisions and a blanket, and soon reached his saddle and bridle which he took along with him to where his horse was staked out.

He had written upon the slip of paper as follows:

"I feel that it is my duty, Unknown Pard, to seek aid for you, and so I steal away like a thief in the night.

"By the time you awake I shall be far on my way toward the fort, and I will push on with all speed, so as to get back to you as soon as possible, with a surgeon and an ambulance.

"I leave a revolver for you, and food and water, all within reach, and there is wood sufficient to keep your fire going for some days.

"Cheer up and expect soon to see me back again with help.

Yours,
"BUFFALO BILL."

"That letter will explain that he is not deserted, but that I go for his good," muttered the scout as he mounted his horse and rode away, riding down the stream as he had come up it, in the water.

He followed the brook down to where it flowed into the larger stream at the ford, and crossing there turned to the left on the trail he had come with his unknown companion.

He wished to go back again by the spot where he had come upon the man hanging from a tree, for from that spot he could push rapidly on, knowing the trail the way he had come.

He rode into the little clump of timber where the hanging had occurred, with no thought of danger to himself, with no belief that a human being was nigh, and so he was startled when suddenly, out of the gloom of a thicket, came the low-spoken words:

"Halt!"

"I wish to speak with you."

Buffalo Bill had drawn rein in an instant with one hand, while the other grasped his revolver and cocked it, so that he was quickly ready to greet friend or foe.

He was in the shadow of the timber, and yet the gloom from whence the voice had come was dense, and he could not penetrate the shadows to see who was lurking there, who had brought him to a halt.

CHAPTER VII.

A WARNING.

To have turned in flight, the scout felt, might bring him a volley from his unseen challenger, while to fire at one concealed would be wrong, as it perhaps was not a foe.

The voice had been in a hoarse whisper, rather as though the speaker wished only to be heard by the one addressed.

So Buffalo Bill, having his horse well in hand for flight or fight, and his revolver ready, stood his ground and said:

"Well, I have halted.

"What have you to say?"

"You are Buffalo Bill?"

"I am."

"You are going into a trap."

"It seems as though I was in one now, as you see me while I only hear your voice."

"No, I am here to warn you of danger."

"Ah! and who are you?"

"That is not the question."

"What is?"

"To save your life, I am here."

"Indeed!"

"And who are my foes?"

"Those who are foes to whoever enters the Valley of Death."

"Ah!"

"And why are you my friend?"

"I will not answer that; but I am here to warn you of danger."

"What danger?"

"Death."

"Indeed, and at whose hands?"

"Never mind, but say that you will obey me."

"Suppose I do not?"

"Then you ride to your death."

"If I do?"

"Then you shall be saved from death."

"I see no other alternative than to obey."

"You are wise."

"But I shall demand a pledge of you."

"What is it?"

"You must promise not to approach nearer to me than you now are, and when I leave you, that you will not attempt to follow my trail."

"If I refuse?"

"I must leave you to your fate, for my life is at stake if I am known to befriend you."

"May you not be leading me into an ambush if I follow you?"

"Why should I, when you are at my mercy now?"

"At your mercy?"

"Yes, for I could send a bullet through your heart now, if I wished."

"Well, I'll accept your terms."

"Then follow me; but remember, do not come close to me."

"I shall not forget," answered the scout.

Then, out of the thicket glided a form upon which the eyes of the scout were riveted at once, as he tried to penetrate the darkness.

The voice had been in a hoarse whisper, and had struck Buffalo Bill as one that was boyish.

But, as the form left the timber, branching short off from the trail which Buffalo Bill had been following, he saw that the one who had warned him was a woman.

She was on foot, had short skirts, a slouch hat, and her long hair fell about her like a veil, while she glided, rather than walked along.

She led the way across the valley, after leaving the timber, and walked rapidly, ever and anon half turning to raise her hand and call out:

"Not too near, remember."

The scout checked his horse, as he seemed inclined to go nearer to his strange guide, and finding that the animal still pressed forward he dismounted and led him along.

Then he kept at the required distance, though he was most anxious indeed to get a closer look at the one who was befriending him.

He was more than ever surprised to find a woman there in that Valley of Death, a weird place which he had believed to hold no inhabitants save wild beasts, unless there was a band of red-skins secretly dwelling there.

"Surely this Valley of Death is panning out most mysteriously," muttered the scout as he walked along in the footsteps of his guide.

"First I find a man hanged here, then that he will tell me nothing about himself, and next I run upon a most remarkable adventure in meeting a girl guide here."

"I do not understand it all, but I must before I give up the trail."

After walking a distance of a mile the guide suddenly halted in a little thicket, and a moment after Buffalo Bill saw her come out on horseback.

"I left my horse here, and now we can push along rapidly; but you must still keep your distance," she said as she started off at a gallop, Buffalo Bill following her.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STRANGE GUIDE.

At the pace which the Girl Guide was keeping up, conversation was out of the question, and so the scout said nothing to her, but still kept his horse at the steady gallop which she had set.

Thus several miles were passed over, and ascending a ridge that was thickly wooded, Buffalo Bill beheld beyond the barren plains stretching far out for many a long mile before him.

Here the guide halted and said:

"I have saved you a dozen miles by bringing you this way, for if you will head for that black peak yonder, a volcanic mountain, you will find yourself on the trail by which you came here when the day dawns."

"How do you know the trail by which I came here?" and as Buffalo Bill spoke he started to ride nearer to the guide when she quickly waved him back with the words:

"Be careful, for you are coming too near!"

"Pardon me; I shall not offend again."

"To answer your question I will say that you could have reached Death Valley only by one trail, unless you know the one I just led you over, and you will return the way you came."

"Suppose I say that I prefer to remain and investigate the mysteries of this valley?"

"Brave a man as you are, you would not dare do that."

"Why not?"

"You love life, and your certain death would follow."

"I would take the chances to know what the mystery here is."

"Don't do it, for you could not find out."

"Do you dwell here?"

"Where else could I dwell?"

"True; but I would like to know who and what you are, that you can live where you say it would be certain death to me to remain?"

"I am what I am, and I can say no more other than to urge you to depart at once and never come here again."

"Suppose I say I will come again?"

"Then you will find your grave here in Death's Valley, for another time I cannot save you."

"From what have you saved me now?"

"From certain death, as I told you."

"Then others than you know of my being here?"

After a moment of hesitation the reply was:

"Others than I know that you came into the valley, and your departure was expected very soon, so that there are those who are now lying in ambush for you."

"I can tell you no more, so now go on your way."

"One question more?"

"Well?"

"How do you know who I am?"

"You do not deny that you are Buffalo Bill?"

"Oh, no."

"I know you as I have seen you before!"

"When and where?"

"It matters not when or where, but I have seen you, and another saw you enter the valley and hence an ambush was prepared for you when you went out, for, as I said, you would have to return the way you came in."

"An ambush to kill me?"

"Yes, for it is a law that one who ventures into this Valley of Death must die."

"But now you must go on your way and delay no longer."

Buffalo Bill hesitated, for he was undecided whether to speak of his unknown companion or not.

His strange guide had not referred to him in any way, and yet being a woman she would hardly be cruel toward him, did she learn of his presence there, after having saved him from an ambush into which he had been riding when she brought him to a halt.

But it flashed across the mind of the scout that he would do well to say nothing of the companion he had left behind in the canyon, but to hasten on to the fort and return as soon as possible to his aid.

The more he saw and knew of the Death Valley, the more anxious he was to solve the mystery hanging over it.

That there were, contrary to his former belief, dwellers there, he was now assured.

But who and what were they?

They were not red-skins, for Indians would not have hanged the man he had rescued, did they wish to put him to death.

Who they were their victim even would not tell the scout, and herein was a riddle to solve.

They were white men beyond all doubt, but what had brought them to the Death Valley, and why did they live in that far-away spot, and allow no one else to enter there, was what the scout could not understand, and his strange guide would offer no explanation, which added to the complication.

CHAPTER IX.

UNLOOKED-FOR DANGER.

In the darkness Buffalo Bill could tell nothing about his strange guide, especially as she kept him fully thirty feet distant from her.

Her voice was low and musical, and he felt sure that she was a young girl.

She had leaped into her saddle when she mounted, with the ease of an athlete, and had led him over a trackless country unerringly, for no trail could be discovered.

Now she pointed to a dark mass towering against the starlit sky, and miles away, and told him to go to it and he would strike the trail by which he had come to Death Valley.

He recognized the mountain as a volcanic peak which he had passed the morning he had come near to the Death Valley, and knew that she told him the truth.

He could also see from where he stood upon the ridge, that there was only a narrow rocky trail leading from it to the plain below, and the way they had come was unmarked, so that she doubtless had told the truth in saying, as a stranger to the valley, he could not but go out as he had come in.

"So we must part here?" he said, at last.

"Yes."

"When will I see you again?"

"Never, perhaps."

"Suppose you were to find a man lying wounded in Death Valley, alone and in distress, what would you do with him?"

"I would aid him if in my power."

"And suppose your friends were to find him?"

"My friends?"

"Yes."

"Who are they?"

"Those whom you dwell here with?"

"I have no friends."

"Are they your foes?"

"We will not discuss myself, Buffalo Bill; but I will say that were you found by me wounded and in distress here in this valley I would risk life to care for you; but I beg of you not to return here and take the chances of coming to harm."

"I have warned you, and I can say no more."

"Now good-by, for you know your way from here, and I dare not remain longer."

She waved her hand as she spoke, leaped into her saddle and was off in a gallop, leaving the scout standing by his horse and looking after her.

"Were it not that I had to go to the fort for aid for that poor fellow, I would remain here and take her trail at dawn," muttered the scout.

"I was almost tempted to tell her of that mysterious man, whose life I had saved; but it is best perhaps that I did not."

"Well, I must get on my way now as rapidly as possible, and this cut off of twenty miles, which she said she saved me, will more than make up for the time I have lost; in fact, from her account, I would have been killed from ambush had I gone the way I came in."

The scout now slowly descended the rocky and dangerous trail to the plains below, and then mounting rode on at a canter, his guide being the volcanic peak miles ahead.

His horse was fresh and pushed on at a swift canter and gradually the range behind him grew dim in the distance, while the volcano ahead loomed up larger and larger.

Just before dawn he reached the base of the volcano and recognized the surroundings,

as he had passed there on his way to the Death Valley.

He had camped there, and seeking the same spot, where there was a pool of water in a wash, and a patch of grass, he staked out his horse and rolling himself in his blankets lay down to catch a couple of hours of rest and sleep.

Deprived of his sleep by his care of the unknown, he felt the need of it greatly, and at once sunk into a deeper slumber than it was his wont, when in danger.

But there on that barren plain he looked for no peril from Indian or white man, so felt safe, knowing that he would awake with the coming of dawn, so well had he trained himself to do so in his wild life upon the frontier.

But the scout had not dreamed that his approach to the volcanic mountain had been seen, for others were there ahead of him.

They saw him stake his horse out upon the little grass plot near the pool, and then lie down to sleep.

In their hiding place they watched him until they felt sure that he was sound asleep, and then a form crept noiselessly toward him.

Another followed, and another until five dark forms were visible all stealing cautiously toward the sleeping scout.

CHAPTER X.

TO LIE IN AMBUSH.

"MEN, come with me for there is red work to be done."

The speaker was a heavily bearded, long-haired man who rode into a camp in Death Valley where half a dozen men were lounging about, their horses staked out near.

The one who rode into camp showed that he had ridden hard, for his horse was covered with foam and was panting like a hound.

At the words of the one whose sudden arrival had brought them all to their feet, they started with all haste, without any parleying or questioning, to saddle their horses.

The leader, for such he appeared, took the saddle off of his own tired animal and caught one of the dozen animals staked out to ride in his stead.

The men were soon mounted and ready, four of them, while two remained in the camp, which was more than a temporary one, to judge from appearances.

The leader led the pace at a gallop, back on the trail he had come, offering no explanation to his followers, and held the gait until mile after mile was gone over.

At last they came to the summit of the ridge which surrounded the Death Valley, and here a halt was made for a rest, apparently.

But ere the men could stake out their horses the leader called to them and said:

"See here, pards, we will not halt here but go on to Volcano Peak, for there is the best place for an ambush, as night or day our horses can be kept in hiding, and there is a pool of water there as well."

"You expect some one, Cap?" asked one of the men.

"No, for some one has already entered the valley, and I wish to capture him when he comes out."

"Or kill him?"

"Yes, in the end it will come to that, but I wish first to take him alive."

"He's in the valley, Cap?"

"Yes."

"More than one?"

"No, only one."

"He's got nerve, or he has not heard of the valley."

"Oh yes, he's got nerve, and more, he knows the stories told about the valley."

"Then he has come spying around?"

"That is just it and you know this valley is fatal to any one who comes here."

"It is, pard, and he'll be no exception."

There was a moment of silence, as though each one of the five men was plotting his own way to get rid of the one who dared venture into the valley, or was recalling some red deed he had been guilty of in the past.

Then the leader said:

"As I told you, men, this one must be

taken alive, and more, he must not be harmed."

"A friend of yours, Cap?"

"No, the bitterest foe I have on earth, and that is why I wish to capture him alive."

"I see, it will be a good thing to see him die just for revenge, killing him as you like best."

"Just so, Nat."

"But who do you think the man is?"

All looked up with interest, but not one spoke, simply waiting to be told, as though they expected to hear the name of some one who was well known to them.

As though realizing that he had a surprise in store for his men, the leader said:

"Well, pards, the man who has dared venture into this valley, and whom we are to capture alive as he comes out, is none other than—"

The leader paused, and the men were all anxiety to have him continue, but said nothing, as they seemed to feel that he enjoyed holding them in suspense.

Then he remarked:

"The man is Buffalo Bill, chief of scouts at Fort Defiance."

The words fell like a thunderbolt among the listeners, for not one of them had expected to hear the name their leader uttered.

"Buffalo Bill?" came in a chorus as each man uttered the name.

"Yes."

"He has come into this valley?"

"Yes, Nat."

"Cap, that looks bad."

"We can capture him."

"Oh, yes, or kill him; but then he is too big a man not to be missed, and if he don't turn up, they'll send a regiment to look for him, while there is one who, if harm falls upon him, will hunt down those who have done the deed."

"Who is that, Nat?"

"Frank Powell, the Surgeon Scout."

"Yes, they are firm pards, and the Surgeon Scout is a dangerous man."

"But Buffalo Bill has come here and he must suffer the consequences."

"I only wish that he had not come."

"So do I."

"Better let him go back unharmed."

"And guide a regiment here? Oh, no! for he has not come here without making some discovery."

"No, he has come, and he must suffer the consequences."

"Come, we will ambush him at Volcano Peak when he comes out," and the men rode on to the place of ambush.

CHAPTER XI.

THE CAPTURE.

BUFFALO BILL was awakened from his sound slumber by a command that could not but startle even his iron nerve, for he heard the words:

"Buffalo Bill, you are my prisoner!"

The scout's eyes opened upon a scene that was terrifying, and the first glance was sufficient to show him that the slightest resistance meant instant death, for he saw five forms standing within a few feet of him, and as many rifles were covering him.

"Well, pards, you have got me covered," he said, without the slightest show of excitement, and sitting up he coolly glanced about him.

"Yes, so don't be a fool and throw your life away."

"Hand over your guns, Buffalo Bill!"

"If you want them, take them, for I'll not hand them to you."

"Nat, take the guns," ordered the leader, and the man addressed stepped forward and took the scout's rifle and belt of arms.

"Have you gotten everything, Nat?"

"I guess so."

"He's tricky, so search him."

This Nat did, though with evidently a dread that the search might end disastrously for him.

He, however, found no other weapons, and then, with a lariat secured the scout's hands firmly behind him.

"As I am slightly interested, may I ask whose prisoner I am?" inquired the scout.

"You may ask, but I shall not answer."

"What is your pleasure with me?"

"That you will find out in good time."

"All right, I am not impatient," was the indifferent remark of the scout.

When he was secured beyond resistance or escape, the leader sent two men after their horses, while a third went to saddle the animal of Buffalo Bill and bring him up.

In a few minutes all were ready, and then the leader said:

"I shall tie you to your saddle, Buffalo Bill, for well I know what you are capable of, and more, I shall also blindfold you."

"Why, when I am so wholly at your mercy?"

"Well, I have known of your escaping death scores of times, when to get away seemed out of the question, and though I am sure you cannot escape us now, I shall be on the safe side and blindfold you, so you will not know where you are being taken."

"I have nothing to say, for you are the doctor," was Buffalo Bill's cool response, and at once a heavy silk scarf was fastened securely about his eyes.

Then he was aided to mount his horse, his feet were fastened to the stirrups, while the leader held the bridle-rein in his hand to prevent the animal dashing suddenly away.

The party now started upon their way, and the scout relapsed into silence.

But his brain was busy, and every step the horses made was counted, while mental note was made of the trail they were following.

"We are going back the way I came," mused Buffalo Bill, as they began to ascend the slope to the range overlooking the valley.

Hardly had he come to this conclusion when the leader, who rode by his side, asked:

"How was it that we found you at Volcano Peak, Buffalo Bill?"

"Because I happened to be there, I suppose."

"Yes, that is one reason; but you have been in Death Valley."

"Have I?"

"You have, and you did not come out where you went in."

"Didn't I?"

"No, and with any one else I would feel that you had a guide out the way you left the valley."

"And why not with me?"

"Well, you have a way of going pretty much where you please and might find a way where others would not."

"But tell me, did any man guide you out?"

"No, I saw no man to guide me."

"You just stumbled upon the other way out?"

"I leave my horse to do the work of guide when I am at a loss," said the scout evasively.

The leader now rode ahead and the party ascended the range in single file, a circumstance that convinced the scout that they were going back into the valley by way of the trail he had followed in coming out.

"Of course he could see nothing, blindfolded as he was, but he could judge of the country and distance, and was confident that he passed over the range and along the very trail by which the mysterious Girl Guide had led him."

Once over the range they rode along upon a different soil from that beyond, and after several miles had been passed over, going at a canter, they came to a halt, when a voice called out:

"Ho, Talbot, that is Buffalo Bill you have prisoner there?"

"Yes, chief, he came into the valley scouting, and we bagged him on his way out at Volcano Peak," answered the leader of the scout's captors, while the man spoken to as chief said in a determined tone:

"Then he has sentenced himself to death."

CHAPTER XII.

DOOMED.

THE man who had met the party, which had the scout a prisoner, as they rode up and came to a halt, was tall, elegantly formed and dressed in a costume that was picturesque and striking, for he wore gray corduroy pants stuck in top-boots, a velvet jacket of dark blue and embroidered in silver thread, a yellow sash about his waist and a broad sombrero, the latter looped up on one

side with a gold star, and with a chain encircling the crown instead of a cord.

His hair was long and his face was bearded, but hidden beneath a mask of red silk.

He was armed, and had the air of a man who was dangerous, if a foe.

In vain had Buffalo Bill endeavored to follow the nature of the country as they passed over it, for the ride had been a rapid one, there had been a number of turns, and several times they had dismounted.

While nothing was said to convince him of the fact, he was sure that the trail his captors were taking him by was a very dangerous one to take, and when they had halted he knew that considerable of an ascent had been made.

He hoped he would now be freed from the blindfold, for he was anxious to see his surroundings, and more anxious to behold the man who had so readily recognized him, and who had been addressed as chief.

There was a certain tone in the voice which he felt he had heard before.

Calling this man chief told him that the leader of the party who had captured him was simply an under officer, though addressed as "captain" by his men.

It was a surprise, and a startling one, to Buffalo Bill, to discover that the dread Valley of Death had dwellers in it who were indeed to be feared.

Who were they, and why were they there?

Who was the man that had been hanged, and whom he had left in the little canyon?

Then, too, who was his Girl Guide?

These questions the scout could not answer.

Not a word had he overheard to tell him who the men were, or where they were taking him.

He could only wait and hope, but he did not like the chief's words that in venturing into Death Valley he had sealed his doom.

The day had dawned ere the party reached their halting place, and the sun was streaming down into the valley; but all was darkness to the blindfolded scout.

He was freed from the bonds about his feet and ordered to dismount.

This he did, and he was led away a hundred yards or more, his hands still bound behind him, his eyes still blinded.

It seemed to him when he halted that he was in a cavern, for the air was chill and damp, yet he could not tell.

He heard the rattling of chains, and then his arms were freed, while instantly about his wrists were clasped manacles and he was once more secured beyond resistance or escape.

"Will you not take this bandage from my eyes?" he asked.

"Yes, there is no harm in doing so now," was the reply of the man known as Nat.

He removed the scarf, and a thrill of horror ran through the scout as he felt that he could not see.

"Great God! am I blind?" he said, eagerly.

The man by his side laughed and replied:

"You might as well be, in here, for no light comes into this place."

"Ah! I am in a cave?"

"Yes, but you will find the grave darker and colder."

"It is your intention to put me to death, then?"

"Yes, the chief and our captain are arguing the matter now."

"What is their charge against me?"

"Curiosity."

"How do you mean?"

"You were too curious about the Death Valley."

"It seems I had reason to be curious."

"Well, your curiosity will cost you your life, that is all."

"Maybe."

"There is no doubt, but a certainty."

"When am I to start on the long trail?"

"Well, that I don't know, but I guess very soon— Here comes some one now."

Footsteps were heard approaching, and then a voice called out:

"Ho, Nat!"

"Here."

"The prisoner is there?"

"Yes, all secure."

"Buffalo Bill, I am here to tell you, from

the chief, that you are to die at sunrise tomorrow, for it has been so decided."

"I tell you, that you may spend your time in prayer."

"Do you mean to murder me?"

"Yes, you are doomed."

"Why?"

"Because you came into the Valley of Death, for any one who ventures here must die."

"Come, Nat, leave the prisoner with his own thoughts," and the two men walked away, leaving Buffalo Bill in irons and alone in the midnight gloom of the cavern.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FATAL CAVERN.

THAT Buffalo Bill felt his situation in all its keen hopelessness, the reader can well understand.

He was heavily ironed, and feeling, he found that the iron chains were fast about huge rocks, and the manacles upon his wrist were heavy and too strong to break, even had he the means at hand for breaking them.

He tried to slip his hands through, but they were just too small for that.

For the space of a few feet he could move about, and he felt rocks above and on either side of him, for there was not a ray of light that penetrated the darkness of the cavern.

Beneath his feet was a bear-robe, and upon it was a blanket and pillow of grass, with a canteen of water also.

Such were the comforts the place afforded.

He sat down upon the bear-robe and felt about him.

His hand touched something that caused him to start; but only for an instant, for he had an iron nerve.

Then he grasped the object and drew it toward him.

"It is a body," he said in a low tone, and his hand swept over the face and head.

The flesh was icy cold to the touch and the scout thrust the form from him, while he muttered grimly:

"I am not alone in this death-hole at least."

"Some poor victim, I suppose, and his death leads me to feel that it was no idle threat made that I should die."

"Who is there?"

He felt that some one was near him and he was right, for the answer came:

"Don't get skeert, pard, for we has come ter move a body as might not be pleasant comp'ny fer yer."

"He died last night here, and you is in the irons he had on."

"Poor fellow, he has all of my sympathy."

"Better keep it for yerself, pard; but had yer found ther deader?"

"Yes, he lies here by my side."

"Well, you is a game one; but I guess you'll be glad for us to take him away?"

"No, for he was company for me."

"Waal, you is game and no mistake."

"Come, Jack, let's git the stiff out o' ther way, for I doesn't like this old rock tomb myself."

Buffalo Bill heard the men come nearer and felt them drag the body away from its resting-place by his side.

Then he said:

"Who was he?"

"He were a man as come into Death Valley."

"And he was killed for that reason?"

"Yas, he were put here to die, an you see he did it."

"I feel that he did, for I can see nothing in this black hole."

"You is to go the same way."

"To be killed?"

"Yes."

"Do you kill every man who comes into Death Valley?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"It's a way the chief has of getting rid of them as is too curious."

"Have many lost their lives through curiosity?" quietly asked Buffalo Bill.

"Waal, I guess so."

"How many?"

"You'll make thirteen that I knows of."

"Yas, you was an unlucky number, pard," the other man said.

"It seems that the twelve before me, from

your accounts, were also unlucky numbers."

"That's so."

"Why did you not bring a lantern with you?"

"It's unhealthy."

"What do you mean?"

"Waal, it's ag'in' orders of the chief, and I don't want ter see what's in here."

"What is here?"

"Waal, all them as is put to death is buried here, and we is ter dig a grave now for this one."

"I guesses yer'll see a dozen ghosts to-night."

"I am not afraid of ghosts."

"Nor anything else I has heerd of, from all accounts about yer, Buffalo Bill."

"Well, I should like to see about me, and know just what kind of a place I am in."

"You'll feel better for not seeing," was the answer as the two men moved away in the darkness bearing their ghastly burden with them.

They had been gone but a few minutes when Buffalo Bill heard the sound of dull blows, and he recognized them as the strokes of a pickax, and knew that they were burying the unfortunate man who had died there in the cavern.

The sound was kept up for some time, and then a death-like silence followed.

Having lost much sleep of late, and feeling tired, with nothing to do, and unable to think of any plan for escape, the scout schooled his nerves to quietness and lay down upon the robe to get what rest he could.

It was only a few minutes before he was fast asleep, and he slept for a long while and then was awakened by a touch upon his arm.

He quickly grasped a hand and held it with firm grip, while a low voice said:

"I am not here to harm you, but to help you."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE MASCOT.

"Ah! I know that voice," said Buffalo Bill in response to the cautiously uttered words of the one whose hand he had grasped.

"Who am I?"

"One who proved a mascot to me, when I was in danger before."

"Yes, and who did not know that the ambush was at Volcano Peak, instead of on the range."

"That was not your fault."

"Yet I failed to aid your escape, and I am here now to befriend you."

"That is pleasant news for me."

"I will save you, if you are willing to agree to certain terms."

"What are they?"

"I cannot tell you other than that you must take a solemn oath not to return to this valley, or betray what you know of it now."

"If I refuse?"

"If you refuse, Buffalo Bill, you will die as surely as the sun rises to-morrow morning," was the impressive response.

"Then, to save my life, I must vow to keep silence and so allow a band of cut-throats to still dwell in this valley unmolested?"

"Yes."

"Why will you not aid me to escape without my taking such a cowardly oath?"

"Because I cannot."

"Why?"

"I come to you from another."

"Who?"

"I cannot make that known to you."

"Man or woman?"

"I will not tell."

"That one demands the oath of me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well, to allow you to escape that one has to commit a wrong, and to allow you to be put to death would also be a sin."

"I cannot aid you unknown to that one, and so I ask you to take the oath that you may not be put to death."

"They will hardly dare to put me out of the way, desperate as they seem."

"Do not treasure that hope, Buffalo Bill, for you do not know the incentive they have to take your life."

"Yes, you will surely die."

"Well, I suppose I can do nothing else than take the oath."

"You are wise."

"It looks cowardly though to do so."

"Oh, no, for you would only throw your life away not to do so, and if you escape you will simply have to keep silent about Death Valley and what you know of it."

"And allow the red deeds done here to go on?"

"They had better go on than you die and do no good, for after your death they will be continued just the same."

"You are right there, I believe."

"Then be wise and make me a promise that you will do as I ask."

"If I do I am to be allowed to escape?"

"If you do you shall go free from this Death Dungeon to-night."

"What is the oath you wish me to take?"

"Another will ask it of you, not I."

"When?"

"Very soon, but do not be surprised at anything that may occur or you may hear, and when asked for your oath do not answer quickly."

"I can say no more."

Without a sound the speaker glided away from the side of the scout, who muttered to himself:

"Well, if I escape out of this, that woman will indeed be my Mascot."

"It does look cowardly in me to take an oath not to hunt down these villains, and yet life is dear to me, and perhaps some one else may ferret them out."

"I only wish Frank Powell had taken this trail with me, for then he would have been the man to hunt them down."

"I don't suppose my oath will prevent my giving the Surgeon Scout a hint that there is game to hunt in Death Valley."

"Well, it's my oath not to betray the fiends, or my life, and take it I am sure now that they will."

"Yes, I have seen enough since I came into this Valley of Death to show that those who rule here are merciless, for the unknown whom they hanged, the unfortunate victim who died here, are witnesses of their cruelty."

"Ah! I hear some one coming, and it cannot be my mascot, for I could not hear her step."

The scout listened, and there came to his ears the sound of a step.

The footfalls were slow and measured, as though the one coming was feeling his way in the darkness, and there was also heard the sound of a stick striking the rocks to guide the walker forward.

Nearer and nearer came the footsteps, and then, in a low, deep voice came the words:

"Speak, that I may know where you are in the blackness."

"I am here within a few feet of you," answered the scout.

"Good! I feared to fall into the Bottomless Pits, which are near."

"You are Buffalo Bill."

"I am."

"I have come to accept your terms of escape, your oath, for I will trust you," and the man now stood near to the scout, who still remained seated upon the robe.

CHAPTER XV.

THE OATH.

"I know you, Buffalo Bill," said the one who had come into the Death Dungeon, as he stood by the scout.

"You certainly have the advantage of me," was the reply.

"Yes, and will keep it, for in this Egyptian darkness you do not know me."

"That means that in the sunlight I would?"

"Yes."

"Well, whoever you are, what is your motive in sparing my life where others have been shown no mercy?"

"How do you know this?"

"A dead man lay here a few minutes ago."

"Ah, yes."

"And I believe there are a dozen graves in the entrance to this black hole."

"Were you not blindfolded as you came in?" quickly asked the man.

"Oh, yes, but I know that the graves are there, and I ask why do you show me mercy when you have been merciless to others?"

"I have reasons for it which you cannot know."

"Are you the man whom I heard addressed as chief?"

"Suppose that I am?"

"You are not."

"Why do you think so?"

"If you were chief you would make no secret of setting me free."

"A good argument, truly."

"No, I am not chief."

"And we have met before?"

"I did not say so."

"You said that you knew me."

"Who does not?"

"You implied that you were personally known to me."

"We will not discuss that."

"What is it your pleasure to discuss?"

"Your escape."

"That pleases me."

"To remain here is your doom."

"I have been told so."

"You do not care to die like a rat in a hole, so I sent one to ask you to take an oath not to speak of your coming to Death Valley, or to betray what you have seen here—"

"Seen?"

"I should have to possess the eyes of an owl to see anything here."

"You saw before you were captured."

"What did I see?"

"You discovered that the valley was inhabited."

"Yes, I am not blind, or was not then."

"What I am now I cannot tell until I get a glimpse of the sunlight without."

"Well, you are to take oath never to return here again, nor to betray your having been here, or any discoveries you have made."

"If I refuse I am to die?"

"You are."

"If I accept you will aid me to escape?"

"Through another, yes."

"Who is that?"

"One who begged for your life, she whom you told just now you would give your solemn oath not to betray us."

"Will you take my oath?"

"Yes."

"An oath under compulsion is not binding in law."

"It may not be in law, but it is with a man such as you are."

"Thank you."

"I know, if you give your solemn pledge not to betray us, you will keep it."

"And you demand this?"

"I do."

"When?"

"Now, for I have brought a Bible with me, and you are to place your hands, manacled as they are, upon it, and repeat after me the words of the oath which I demand of you."

"In return for which I am to go free?"

"Yes."

"All right, I can see my way to do nothing else, and I certainly must admit that you have me at your mercy."

"I certainly have."

"Now kneel."

The scout did so.

"Hold out your hands until you feel this open Bible that I hold, and place them upon it."

Buffalo Bill was about to obey when he felt some one step to his side.

Not a sound was made, but his hands were grasped and held up, while the chains were shaken purposely.

He felt that other hands than his had rested upon the open Bible when the holder of it said:

"There, that is right."

"Now to the oath."

"Yes, the oath."

Buffalo Bill started, for he had not uttered the words, which had come in a deep voice from lips within two feet of him.

"Repeat after me."

"I will," and it was again the voice near him that uttered the words.

"I do solemnly vow—"

"I do solemnly vow—" came in the hoarse voice of the unknown.

"Not to betray my coming to this valley—"

"Not to betray my coming to this valley—" were the words repeated as before.

"Or to make known aught that I have discovered here."

These words were also repeated as before. "I solemnly vow not to return here again, so help me High Heaven!"

These words followed as had the others.

"Amen!"

"Amen!" came the response.

"Good! you have saved your life, Buffalo Bill, for I will send one here to guide you to freedom; but God help you, if you break your oath."

"So be it," said Buffalo Bill, for the mysterious utterer of the oath a moment before had already glided away from his side.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE GIRL GUIDE.

BUFFALO BILL spoke again, to the one who had demanded the oath of him, but he made no reply and the scout heard him shuffling away in the darkness.

He was more than amazed at what had happened, for he had not been the one to take the oath upon which his life depended.

That the one who had administered it thought that the scout had uttered the words, there was no doubt whatever.

He had no thought that any other than the scout and himself were present in the dungeon.

Buffalo Bill had not suspected the presence near of any other until he felt the touch of a hand upon his arm.

Who that other was he could but guess.

He had felt that the hands, that thrust his own back from the Bible, were small, and when the voice repeated the oath it was disguised, and but for the fact that no one was thought to be there, it might have betrayed the fact that it was a woman's tones disguised.

That he had not made the vow, though supposed to have done so, was a source of great relief to the scout.

That the one who had made the vow wished to prevent his uttering it, implied that she wished him free to do as he pleased.

This would mean that she wanted the band to be tracked down, wished him to return to the Death Valley and unearth the dark mystery hanging over it.

The scout lay back upon the robe with a feeling of almost contentment.

He felt that in his Mascot, be she who she might, he had a firm friend in camp, and he was willing to leave his life in her hands.

Of course the added mysteries of the Death Valley impressed him more and more.

In the weird retreat there was certainly a band of lawless men, held there for some purpose beyond the understanding of the scout.

Among these men was a woman, and she had proven his friend.

Then there was another friendly to him—the one who had demanded the oath of him, under promise of setting him free if he took it.

At the head of this outlaw band was a chief, who took the lives of men at will whom he feared or wished out of his way.

These things the scout pondered over deeply while awaiting for the next act in the strange drama in which he was an actor.

It seemed that he waited a long time, but then, with the extreme darkness about him, he had no way to judge the time.

He was hungry and most uncomfortable, bound as he was and in total darkness, yet he would bear anything to make his escape.

At last he felt that some one was near him.

He had heard no sound, but instinct told him that he was not alone.

That he was right in his surmise was proven a moment after, when a low voice said:

"I have come for you."

"You are indeed my friend."

"No, I am simply doing what I deem my duty toward you, Buffalo Bill."

"We will not quarrel about the motive, I assure you, that prompts you to be so kind."

"I am going to set you free."

"Thank you."

"But you must do as I tell you."

"What would you have me do?"

"I am going to trust you."

"You are very kind."

"I am going to let your hands be free, but

you must be blindfolded until I see fit to let you remove the bandage from your eyes."

"So be it."

"You must not, under any circumstances, raise your hands to remove this bandage until I give you permission."

"I will obey you."

"Now let me unlock those irons."

She felt for the iron manacles, and soon had unlocked them.

Then she took a scarf from about her neck, and with it securely bandaged the scout's eyes, so that he could not have seen a ray of light when gazing at the sun.

"Now, give me your hand."

The scout did so, and she led on along through the cavern, following its windings with a slow but sure tread.

At last they came out into the open air.

It was a starlight night, and the Girl Guide still led the scout along, holding him by the hand, and following a trail that was dangerous for even a pedestrian to travel.

She at last reached a valley, and then spoke for the first time:

"Your horse is here, and your belt of arms hang upon the saddle-horn."

"You must still remain blindfolded, however, for I will lead your horse as I have you."

"I will do as you tell me," was the reply.

The scout was now led up to his horse, which was saddled and bridled, and his belt of arms and rifle did indeed hang upon the saddle-horn.

At the request of the guide he mounted, while she, taking the rein of the horse, led the way on down the valley, walking at a brisk pace.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PROMISE.

BUFFALO BILL rode along in silence for a couple of miles, or more, his horse led by the girl.

He knew that it was night by the feeling of the atmosphere, and something told him that he had traveled over a perilous trail.

But, though his arms were free he did not once raise his hands to remove the bandage from his eyes, great as was the temptation to do so.

He had given his promise to his rescuer and he would not break it.

So on he went, the guide leading his horse, until at last she came to a halt and said:

"We part here, for you can find your way alone now."

"Not blindfolded?"

"Oh, no."

"Dismount and I will take the bandage off your eyes."

He obeyed and a moment after he could see.

But the long time he had been in total darkness, and the blindfolding, caused his eyes to feel strangely at first and blink even when turned upon the stars.

"I had half feared that I was blind, and I am glad to see that I am all right," he said.

"You will be all right soon."

"Now do you know yonder rock?"

"Yes, if I mistake not, you led me by it on my way out before."

"Yes, and after passing it give your horse his head, for he has been over the trail with you and will follow it."

"But leave Volcano Peak far to your right, as you may find foes there."

"I will do so, for I am in no humor for a fight yet."

"No, and your escape must not be known until to-morrow night, when you are to be sent for to be executed."

"Ah! I see."

"I had forgotten that I was to be killed to-morrow."

"As surely as you had remained a prisoner you would have been."

"I do not doubt it, and I feel that I owe you my life."

"I am glad that you do," was the low response.

"And let me tell you that I shall hope to some day be able to prove my appreciation of it."

"Never mind about that now."

"Tell me one thing?"

"Well?"

"Will not your release of me get you into trouble?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I will not be known as your rescuer."

"But some one will be?"

"Perhaps, though I have tried to cover up the tracks of rescue so as to have it appear that you slipped your hands through the irons, found your way out of the cave and to your horse, for your saddle and weapons were near the corral."

"Should it be discovered that some one did aid my escape?"

"Then some one will be shot, that is all."

"Little loss if it be one of the band."

"Perhaps yes."

"But now I have a favor to ask of you?"

"Well?"

"Will you grant it?"

"How can I refuse?"

"You did not take an oath not to return here?"

"No, some one took it for me."

"Of course I did: but I did so for a purpose."

"And that purpose?"

"That you might not be prevented from coming here and ferreting out the mystery of Death Valley."

"I shall do so, for I am not bound by the oath."

"But the promise?"

"Well."

"Is that you will not come for six months."

The scout was silent, for he wished to oblige his rescuer, but yet recalled the man lying helpless up the canyon, and for whom he was to return.

"I do not see how I can promise that," he at last said.

"Why not?"

"Well, I have my reasons and I can not tell you what they are."

He was in a quandary, for kind as the girl had been to him she might not be the friend of the man he had found hanged.

He dared not tell her that he had one in hiding, for he could not guess the result.

She might know of his hanging, and might not.

The strange conduct of the man in making nothing known to him, caused him to fear that the discovery that he was not dead would at once be the means of putting him to death at the hands of the band who had before sought his life.

The girl might be trusted, and might not. At last he said, having decided what he would do:

"Yes, I'll make the promise, not to return for six months, once I have left the valley."

"Thank you—good-night," and without another word she glided away back on the trail they had come.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

BUFFALO BILL called after the retreating girl but she waved her hand only, making no reply.

He would not follow her, knowing that it was her wish that he should not.

Yet he wanted to know more that she alone could tell him.

Turning to his horse, when she had disappeared, he found a haversack full of provisions strapped to the saddle, and a couple of blankets also.

His guide had certainly remembered his wants.

For some minutes after she had disappeared Buffalo Bill stood in deep thought.

At last he said to himself:

"Well, I could not but make her the promise, after all she did for me, and six months is not very long to wait, with other duties devolving upon me, especially as in that time I can organize a band of men to come here with me and search out every mystery in this valley."

"I am certain of one thing, however, and that is that no one else will dare come here in the mean time, so the secret will keep for me to discover."

"As I have given my promise the only thing I can do now is to take that unknown pard of mine away with me to-night."

"It is not yet midnight, and the canyon is only half a mile from here, so I will go after him."

"He can ride and I walk, for I must strap him on in some way, and we'll get to a hiding-place by dawn, and remain all day, when we can push on by night again."

"It will be slow and tedious work to take him with me, but I can do nothing else that I can see, for my pledge bars me from coming back for him."

"I did not dare tell her that he was there, good as she seemed, for what he is to her I could not guess."

Having made up his mind to the course he would pursue, the scout mounted and rode on the trail to the stream, and at the crossing turned up the little brook toward the canyon.

He soon came in sight of the canyon and cautiously approached, after staking out his horse.

As he neared the end he saw the glimmer of the firelight and was not long in reaching it.

But an exclamation of surprise burst from his lips as he saw that *the unknown was gone?*

Was he deceiving him in claiming to be unable to walk?

Had he deceived him merely to have the scout leave him?

Buffalo Bill stood for some time trying to answer the questions he asked himself.

He at last gave it up as useless and began to search about the fire for traces of the missing man.

He threw more wood on the fire and made a bright blaze.

Then he saw that it had been many hours since the fire had been replenished with wood.

This meant that the unknown had been gone for some time.

The blankets had been rolled up, the provisions taken, and certain it was that the man had been either able to depart unaided, or he had been assisted.

If the former, then he surely had deceived Buffalo Bill in pretending to be helpless.

If the latter, then he had been found by his foes, and that would mean his death.

Buffalo Bill's search revealed nothing more than that the unknown was gone.

At last, after thinking the matter over from every standpoint, Buffalo Bill decided what he would do.

"As I have not yet left the valley my promise can still hold good, I guess."

"At any rate the mysterious going from here of a man I deemed utterly helpless, alters my plans, for I shall remain to-night and to-morrow."

"Up the canyon, beyond the graves I saw there, is good water and grass in plenty, and I'll make my camp there."

"I can stand at bay in the head of that canyon against a score of men, so sheltered would I be among the rocks, and I can retreat, if I have to, by climbing the cliffs, if I have to leave my horse, and I am just as good on my feet as any man who might follow me."

"Yes, as I have been supplied generously with provisions by my Mascot, I'll remain here several days and see what further discoveries I can make."

With this the scout went after his horse and led him to the head of the canyon, where he staked him out on a plot of luscious grass.

He unsaddled him then and selecting a camping-place, built a fire among the rocks.

Going to the other fire an eighth of a mile down the canyon, he pulled the logs away, leaving them to go out.

Then he went back to his camp and cooked supper, in which he stood greatly in need, not having had any thing to eat for thirty-six hours.

With his hunger satiated he wrapped himself in his blankets and was soon fast asleep.

The sun peering over the mountains aroused him and he was quickly astir.

Having changed his horse's grazing-ground and led him to water, he prepared his breakfast and was then ready for his day's work, for he intended to spend the daylight in seeing what discoveries he could make.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE SEARCH.

BUFFALO BILL first climbed to the top of the cliff, and sheltered by a clump of bushes, took a survey of the valley.

There it lay before him, stretching away for many miles in the sunlight, green, beautiful in scenery, inviting, with its streams, timber mottes, hills, small vales and canyons, all peaceful as though not bearing the name of being fatal to all who entered it.

A small band of elk was feeding a mile away, and half a dozen coyotes were loping along the trail toward the little river.

An eagle was soaring aloft, and not a human being was visible far or wide.

The scout had his field-glass with him, and closely searched every knoll, motte and meadow, only to see wild animals, roaming about as though in no dread of their mortal enemy man.

Then he descended to the canyon, saw that his horse was well staked where grass was plenty, put a log on his fire, and moved down toward the former camp.

He saw where the blankets had been, and his eyes fell upon a slip of paper fastened to a stick.

It was the one he had left for the unknown, but now there was other writing upon it with a pencil.

The scout read it aloud as follows:

"Make no search for me, for it will be fatal to you and yours."

"Leave this valley at once, and await until time solves mysteries here."

"Do not come here again unless you are called upon to do so by

THE UNKNOWN."

Buffalo Bill read and reread these lines.

They were in a bold hand, and though not addressed to him he knew that he was the one for whom the advice was intended.

He could not decipher from what he had read whether the man had gone of his own accord or been taken away.

He looked about for trails, but found none, save those made by himself in moving about.

He walked on down the canyon, but could find no tracks of hoofs save those made by his own horse, and these were faint.

From the canyon he followed the stream down toward the little river.

He had his rifle with him, and two revolvers, for, he having given one of his pistols to the Unknown, he had taken the one carried in his saddle-holster to place in his belt.

If he saw any one he could hide, being on foot, and he searched well ahead and in every direction before he made a move.

Reaching the ford, he halted there.

Closely he examined the tracks, and he saw that since he had passed across the river, wild animals had gone there to drink, thus obliterating his own and all other trails.

For over an hour Buffalo Bill remained in hiding at the ford, hoping some one of the lawless band would come along.

Had one done so, the scout would then and there have tried conclusions with him.

He was just about to leave his hiding-place at the ford, when suddenly he saw a herd of antelope, feeding half a mile away in the valley, go flying away as from sight of some danger.

Instantly the scout was on the *qui vive*, and his glass at his eyes soon revealed a horseman ride into sight.

He was coming leisurely along directly upon the trail leading to the ford.

"He is my game," muttered Buffalo Bill, and he got his weapons ready for use.

He was lying amid a group of rocks overgrown with bushes, and not two hundred feet from the ford.

Out came the horseman, and Buffalo Bill had made up his mind to bring him to bay by a demand to surrender.

As he drew nearer the scout saw that he was a tall man, gorgeously dressed and wearing a mask.

But, just as he was preparing to challenge him, he fortunately glanced behind him, and following his look, Buffalo Bill saw half a dozen horsemen coming up the valley toward him.

This sight was a great disappointment to Buffalo Bill, for he knew that he dared not risk a fight with seven desperate men, no matter how well fortified he might be, and having the advantage of an ambush.

They came on at a gallop after the one in advance, who did not seem to be disturbed in the least by their coming, which showed that they were his friends not foes.

The leader halted in the stream to water his horse, and soon after the others came up.

"Did you find any trace of him?" asked the first horseman quickly.

"No, sir, he has not yet left the valley," was the answer.

"Then let every canyon and thicket in it be searched, for his escape may mean death to us all."

"Yes, chief," was the answer, and what followed the scout did not distinctly hear, but he felt that he was the object of their conversation, and he knew his danger full well.

If they attempted to carry out their order, to search every thicket, they would doubtless begin with the one in which he was hiding, and that would mean a battle to the death, for he would not surrender to any odds, knowing that he would be put to death did he do so, trusting to those men for mercy.

CHAPTER XX.

IN CLOSE QUARTERS.

BUFFALO BILL's face was stern and determined, as he crouched there among the rocks, his rifle ready and his revolvers loosened in his belt.

He saw the men halting at the ford, heard their conversation, and knew that he was the one they were hunting.

At last the chief said distinctly:

"Are you sure that each of the five passes are guarded?"

"Yes, chief."

"He had not passed any of them?"

"No, chief, there was no sign of a trail."

"Might he not have left his horse and gone on foot?"

"He would hardly do that with a desert to cross, and no provisions with him."

"True, then he is still in this valley."

"Yes, chief, somewhere."

"Then find him, and divide here in three parties of two each, for I will continue on to the retreat."

The scout gave a sigh of relief at this for if he had but two men to deal with, and be in ambush, he could readily render a good account of them.

The chief held some further conversation with his men and then rode on alone over the trail, which Buffalo Bill knew must take him up to his retreat in the valley, wherever that was, for having been blindfolded in going there he could not be sure where it was.

The chief riding on, the men also separated, going in three different directions by twos.

To the regret of the scout two of the men went on up the little brook, toward his camp.

That meant that they were going to the canyon and would find his horse.

The scout at once decided to follow them, as soon as they were out of sight, and try conclusions then and there with them, for it would not do for him to lose his horse and camp outfit.

If he did, this would almost compel a surrender on his part, for hunger would drive him to it, and on foot, without food, he could never cross the barren plains and reach the fort.

But two of the men remained so long at the ford that the others got out of sight and would reach the canyon, and he knew that it would be madness for him to meet them on the open plain, when a shot would bring the others to their aid.

At last the two at the ford moved away, going toward the other side of the range, and the third party had been told by the chief to make the rounds of the passes and order the men there to keep a bright lookout for the escaped prisoner.

There was nothing for the scout then to do but endeavor to reach the upper part of the valley, where the nature of the ground he could see would afford him a more secure hiding-place.

"I am in for it, that is certain, and about my only chance will be to go into hiding and try and recapture my horse as they come along with him."

"If they do not come this way, then I can only lay for some fellow who has a good horse and take him."

"I'll follow the trail of the chief now, and see where it will lead me, for I might as well fight it out in one place as another."

So saying the scout left his hiding-place and started on up the valley, following the tracks of the chief's horse.

He walked rapidly, being anxious to get out of sight, as the valley was open for a couple of miles.

At last he reached undulating ground, and where there was timber scattered here and there.

The trail led on however toward the hills, and Buffalo Bill was glad to see that his advantages for hiding, or standing at bay, were growing better and better as he went along.

At last, as he turned a point of rocks, he came to a sudden halt, for a horse and rider were before him.

He gave a sigh of relief as he saw that it was his Mascot.

She had evidently seen him some distance off, for she said quietly:

"I was waiting for you."

"Waiting for me?"

"Yes, for I saw you when you came out of the timber yonder."

"Well?"

"I was going in search for you."

"Then you knew that I had not left the valley?"

"Yes."

"I did not break my promise, for I had not left."

"True, but why did you not leave?"

"I sought a hiding-place in the canyon for the time being, intending to leave later on."

"Why do so?"

"I will tell you frankly, that I had a companion awaiting me."

She started at this and said quickly:

"You had a companion in this valley?"

"I did."

"Where?"

"Up in the canyon a couple of miles to the right of the ford."

"Where is he now?"

"I do not know."

"You left him there when I led you out of the valley?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because he was hurt, and could not go with me."

"I intended to return for him."

"And where is he now?"

"Gone."

"Where?"

"I do not know."

"I went to get him and carry him away at all hazards, but found him gone."

"I remained in the canyon all night, and began a search for him this morning."

"I had reached the ford, when I met the chief and six men, and I went into hiding."

"Buffalo Bill, are you telling me the truth?" asked the girl in an impressive manner.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE SCOUT EXPLAINS.

BUFFALO BILL met the eyes of the girl squarely now, at her question, and answered:

"I am telling you the truth."

"I went to the canyon for my friend, and I found him gone."

"Not having left the valley, I determined to make a search of it, so came down to the ford, when I saw that masked man and six others."

"He sent them off to search for me, telling two to go the rounds of the passes and have a close watch kept."

"Two went up the canyon, so have, of course, found my horse and outfit."

"I came on here, and that is all that I have to tell you."

"You are a bold man, Buffalo Bill, to remain in this valley after what has happened."

"Few men would have gone in search of a comrade under the circumstances."

"It would have been cowardly to have deserted him."

"Why did you not tell me that he was there?"

"I did not know how you would consider it, or if you would have protected him as you had me."

"There would not have been the secret motive, perhaps; but I would not have wished your friend to be sacrificed."

"I now wish that I had told you."

"You are sure that he is not in the canyon?"

"Yes."

"Might he not have found a better hiding-place?"

"No."

"Was his horse gone?"

"He had no horse."

The girl looked at Buffalo Bill curiously, and he at her.

He saw her now in the glare of day, and beheld a young and really beautiful girl, for she was certainly not over twenty.

Her form was slender, yet well-formed, willowy and showed strength and endurance.

She was clad in a riding habit of buckskin, embroidered and beaded, and wore a sombrero that sat jauntily upon her head.

She had a face to attract attention anywhere, and especially when such a fine face was seen out in Death Valley, and the scout gazed upon it with interest and admiration commingled.

He saw that she possessed courage stamped upon every feature, and it was a countenance to trust thoroughly.

What such a woman could be doing there, was what puzzled Buffalo Bill even more than the other mysteries of Death Valley.

"Well, Buffalo Bill, I am sorry you have lost your friend, and I shall make it my business to find out what has become of him."

"But now to save you is the first thing to do, for never in your life were you in greater danger than you are now."

"I appreciate that I am in very close quarters; but I never say die as long as I see a chance of getting out of a scrape."

"Do you see your way out now?" asked the girl with a faint smile.

"Well, no, but I am looking for a way out."

"There is but one way for you to extricate yourself."

"And that way is—"

"To trust to me."

"I certainly cannot go far wrong in doing that, after my past experience of your skill, courage and kindness."

"It is fortunate now for you that you left your horse behind you, for now you have no trail, and I can save you."

"Do you see that cliff yonder?"

"I do."

"Go there and hide among the rocks, climbing up some thirty feet."

"There remain in hiding until I come here to-night for you, and I will bring you a horse, provisions and blankets, and will guide you once more out of danger, after which I shall expect you to keep your promise."

"I will do so."

"Now go to your hiding-place," and without another word the strange girl rode on her way in the direction from whence the scout had come.

Buffalo Bill found the cliff easy to climb, and he was not long in discovering a place among the rocks where he could hide securely, and where there was some sage brush growing which he could peer through at the trail and be securely concealed himself.

He settled himself comfortably there and waited, taking the opportunity to eat his dinner, which he had brought with him.

He had been in hiding about an hour when he heard the sound of hoofs, and soon there came into sight around the point of rocks the two men who had gone to the canyon in search of him.

They were not alone, however, for the mysterious Girl Guide was with them, and one of the men was leading his own splendid horse which they had found there.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SCOUT SECURES A PRIZE.

"RIGHT now would I take all chances and drop those two fellows, thus securing my horse again, if it were not that my Mascot is with them."

"No, I must not go back upon her," muttered the scout, while, as though dreading that he might be tempted to fire upon them, the girl, after coming around the rocks, rode quickly to the side of the men which would shield them from a bullet in that direction.

The scout was therefore forced to see his horse go by, in the charge of two men whom he knew to be outlaws, and his outfit as well, leaving him dismounted, without food or bedding, and with only his weapons.

If the strange girl returned, as she had promised, all would be well; but if prevented from doing so from any cause beyond her control, or if she dared not risk doing so, the position of the scout was one of direst danger.

This he realized, and hence the great temptation to drop the two men from their saddles, recapture his horse and make his escape while he could.

But he resisted the temptation and the men were allowed to pass on by unmolested.

They disappeared from sight, the girl accompanying them, and the scout was left to his own reflections, by no means of the most cheerful kind.

He, however, was one to accept a situation with good grace, be it what it might, so he at once settled down to watch and wait in patience.

An hour or more passed and again he heard the approach of hoofs.

He listened attentively, and his well-trained ear told him that there was but one horse coming.

At once he decided upon his course of action.

His Mascot might return, and she might not.

He would be upon the safe side and act for himself.

Quickly he climbed down the cliff and ran to a huge boulder, around which the trail wound.

He had just gotten into position when a horseman came into sight.

It was Talbot, the man who had captured him, and whom the men had called "captain."

"Ah!" said Buffalo Bill, and a grim smile came over his face.

Talbot was well mounted and armed, and, as he turned the point of rocks, he drew his horse down from a gallop to a walk.

The scout was ready, perfectly cool and waited with the patience of an Indian.

There was not the slightest tremor of excitement about him, and his face wore the fearless look natural to it and which no danger or suffering could daunt.

Nearer and nearer came the outlaw, riding leisurely along without the slightest dread of danger.

As though tired of riding, when he neared the rock he threw one leg over his saddle-horn, and rode at ease.

But his face changed color, his whole manner was that of terror when suddenly directly before his horse stepped Buffalo Bill, his rifle ready and covering him, and the words were heard:

"Halt!"

"Hands up, pard, for I need your aid just now!"

Talbot dared not move a muscle, and his horse halted at the scout's command.

The outlaw saw that he was covered, and he recognized at a glance that he was in very dangerous company.

He did not raise his hands, for he seemed unable to do so, and they hung limp and powerless by his side.

Then the scout stepped forward and quickly disarmed him, at the same time ordering his prisoner to dismount.

Talbot obeyed without a word.

Buffalo Bill had noticed that under the cliff the wind had hollowed out a place in the rocks large enough to hide several horses in, and he at once went there with his prisoner and his animal.

A blanket was taken from under the saddle and laid down for the horse to stand on, so that his iron-shod hoofs would make no sign, and the head of the animal was covered to prevent his neighing, should any of the other outlaws come in sight.

Then the scout securely bound his prisoner and sat down by his side, his rifle and weapons ready for instant use should he be surprised in his retreat by the coming of any of the outlaw band.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A PLOT FOR SAFETY.

BUFFALO BILL had just seated himself by his prisoner, when it suddenly occurred to him that when he had taken the precaution to prevent the horse from betraying his presence there, to any one who might pass, he had left it in the power of the outlaw to do so.

At once he said:

"See here, pard, I wish to have a little talk with you, and there is no time to lose."

"Well?" growled the man, speaking for the first time since his capture.

"Who are you?"

"None o' your business, Buffalo Bill."

"I have decided to make it my business, so it will be well for you to answer, as there is a very small thread between life and death, when a life is in the way."

The prisoner glanced up quickly at this and said:

"Do you intend to kill me?"

"That depends."

"Upon what?"

"Whether I have to or not."

"You wouldn't be coward enough to kill a man at your mercy?"

"Well, I don't know, since I have been studying under you, as you certainly intended to kill me and I was at your mercy, and many a poor fellow has been put out of the way by your gang, yes, and women and children too, if I am not greatly mistaken."

"I have not killed any one."

"Well, you are in bad company and that condemns you."

"Besides, I have not forgotten that I was your prisoner."

"And how in the name of Old Nick did you escape?" suddenly asked the man.

"Oh, I got away easily enough."

"You should see that a man's hands are not small enough to slip through irons before you put them on."

"Well, you are clever, but your Patron Saint guided you out of that cavern, as a false step would have sent you to perdition, you bet."

"Well, I did not take the false step."

"You were in luck."

"As I am now in catching you."

"It won't do you any good."

"You think so?"

"I know it."

"That depends upon how much you value your life."

"I don't understand you."

"I'll be explicit enough so that you can."

"All right."

"You are my prisoner."

"Sure."

"I have your horse here and I see that you have a haversack of provisions on your saddle."

"Yes."

"We can eat sparingly, so it will last us to the fort."

"To the fort?"

"Yes, for we can take turn about riding and get there in three days."

"We won't get there."

"Why?"

"You won't get out of this valley with me."

"Are you sure?"

"I am."

"Why not?"

"Well, where you have to pass out is guarded."

"Your passes are not guarded by more than two men at each, and I can play the part of Captain Talbot to get up within range, I guess, and drop the guards on duty."

"Then I'll bring you up and the horses of the guards will aid us, see?"

"Yes, I see," disconsolately said the man.

"Now there is a chance for you to save your life."

"How?"

"Go with me to the fort with the determination to make a clean breast of it about this valley, and you shall go free."

"I won't do it."

"Then you will go to the fort and be hanged."

"I cannot betray my pards."

"You cannot or will not?"

"Both."

"Why?"

"Well, I can't explain why, but it is no use to beg me, or to threaten, for I'll hang before I betray my comrades."

The scout saw that the man meant what he said.

He read that there was some deep reason, unknown to him, why he would not save his life by betraying his companions, but he hoped that he might be induced to change his mind, and so said:

"Well, you shall have the chance of refusing at the fort, or accepting."

"If the former you will surely hang, and we will capture your band without your aid."

"If the latter, then you will be a free man."

"It will be the latter, for I cannot betray my comrades, if I hang for not doing so."

"All right, you shall have the chance of changing your mind."

"Now I must gag you."

"Gag me?" cried the man.

"Yes, for some of your comrades may come this way, and hearing the hoof-falls you could call them."

"I won't call out, if you—"

"I cannot trust you," and the scout, with his scarf and the handle of his bowie-knife securely gagged his prisoner so that he could utter no cry to call for aid, should any one pass.

CHAPTER XXIV.

IN AMBUSH ONCE MORE.

BUFFALO BILL had made up his mind to make a break for liberty as soon as it was dark, and not risk the coming back of the Girl Guide who had befriended him.

He would carry his prisoner with him, advance upon the guard, and take his chances in a fight for life with them.

Then, with their horses, and what provisions they must have at the pass with them, he would be able to get along over the desert and make rapid progress in his flight with his prisoner.

With a night's start he could defy pursuit, and if he could not bring his prisoner to terms, and his promise held him from coming back to Death Valley under six months, he knew one whom he could trust as himself, and who would guide a troop of cavalry to the retreat of the outlaws and thus solve the mystery of the dreaded place.

That one was his pard upon many a red trail, his comrade-in-arms and good friend, Frank Powell the Surgeon Scout.

So the scout made up his mind to calmly await the coming of night, when he could act.

Another thing was in his favor he felt, and that was his knowledge of two of the passes, the one where he had entered the valley and the one which the Girl Guide had shown him when he made his escape before.

He could, knowing where they were, leave his horse and prisoner, creep up on foot and get within easy range of the guards and thus discover how many there were and what he would have to contend with.

The hours passed slowly by to both prisoner and captor, the former being anxious and showing it, though the scout was in equal danger with him.

Toward sunset again the sound of hoofs was heard, but not far enough off for the scout to prepare another surprise from ambush, though he knew but one horse was approaching.

Lying quiet and peering out through a piece of sage brush he had put up before him on the rock, he saw come into sight none other than the chief himself.

"If I had only suspected who it was I would have had him," muttered Buffalo Bill, greatly chagrined at having to allow the chief to go by his retreat.

As before, the chief was masked, and he rode along with the pose and ease of a perfect horseman.

Arriving in front of the scout's position he urged his horse into a canter and soon disappeared from sight.

"That man was your chief, Talbot."

"I only wish I had suspected who he was, for you would have had company," said the scout.

Gagged as he was the prisoner could not reply, but his face showed how he regretted that his chief had not suspected his unfortunate position and attempted his rescue.

Having a belief that no one would be following the chief, the scout left his prisoner and sallied forth to look up and down the trail.

He obtained a view down the valley of a couple of miles and saw no one in sight.

As night was casting its shadows now he walked rapidly to a place where he could command a view in the opposite direction,

in which he knew lay the retreat of the mysterious men who dwelt in Death Valley.

He got into a position where he could see for half a mile or more, but was only able to cast a hurried glance before shut out by darkness coming on.

That glance, however, showed him that a horseman was approaching.

Was it the chief returning?

Was it the Girl Guide?

Was it one of the band, for he had seen but one?

Whoever it was, he decided he would hold him up, and at once took position behind the larger boulder, where he had stood when Talbot came along.

Buffalo Bill had not long to wait, for he heard the hoof-strokes coming nearer, and in a short while the outline of a horse and rider appeared close at hand.

Just as the horseman came within twenty feet of the rock, the scout stepped out, rifle ready, and cried:

"Halt! Hands up!"

"So you are holding me up, are you, Buffalo Bill?"

The shadow of the trees there had prevented the scout from seeing who it was, but he recognized the voice at once and said:

"Oh, no, not intentionally; but I was acting in self-defense, not being sure of your return."

"I promised you I would come."

"True, and I trusted you, yet I did not know what might occur to prevent, and so have acted for myself."

"You recognize the horse I am riding?"

"Yes, my own."

"And your saddle and bridle and outfit as well."

"You have brought my horse, then, for me?"

"Yes; so you are free to go your way, only I will have to guide you by a pass where there is no guard."

"I am at your service, miss, but—"

The scout paused, for there came across his mind that he must tell the young girl of his capture of Talbot.

With her acting as his guide, he could not, of course, take the prisoner with him, and he now feared that to do so might get the girl into trouble, a thing he was anxious to avoid, after all her kindness to him.

"So he hesitated in what he was going to say, seeing which she asked:

"But what, Buffalo Bill?"

"How many passes are there?"

"Five that are guarded, and yet only one that is really the entrance to the valley and known as such."

"You know the valley is surrounded by cliffs, and only here and there are there breaks in them, and these are unknown to all save those who dwell here; but, knowing your skill as a scout and plainsman, the chief has guarded the five passes which it might be possible for you to find your way through, and left but one unguarded."

"That one is known to but three persons, and I am one of the trio."

"And you will guide me that way?"

"Yes, for it is the only way out."

"How many men guard the other passes, for I would just as soon take the chances of breaking through them as not."

"You would be mad to do so, for there are five men now at each pass."

"You know the chief is aware of your prowess, so arranged to prevent any mistake, any escape on your part, for he knows how much depends upon it."

"Well, my kind friend, I have a confession to make to you?"

"Yes?" and the girl seemed startled at the words of the scout.

"Yes, I have a prisoner over yonder on the cliff."

"A prisoner?"

"Yes, one of the chief's men!"

"Who?" she eagerly asked.

"The men called him Captain Talbot."

"Ah! when and how did you capture him?"

"I ambushed him here at this rock, held him up, so have my prisoner and his horse safe."

"Had you not appeared as you did, I intended to start with him for the fort to-night."

The girl seemed fretted at what she heard.

She was silent for a moment, and then said, seriously:

"It would have been your death had you made the attempt, for there is but one way you can get out of this valley, Buffalo Bill, and that is through my guidance.

"You must set that man free, or I will not do one thing to help you."

CHAPTER XXV.

THE AGREEMENT.

BUFFALO BILL gazed up into the face of the girl as she spoke, and saw determination stamped upon every feature.

Still he did not wish to give up his advantage gained in his prisoner, and so said:

"Why must I give up one who is a means of safety to me?"

"See here, Buffalo Bill, I have tried to act for your good, and to prove it I kept you from taking the oath demanded of you in the cavern, and I have come now to save your life.

"But there are others to be taken into consideration, and I must act for them as well as for you.

"I have asked you to promise not to come back here within six months."

"And I have agreed to it."

"True, for in that time you may be able to render good service, and I can accomplish certain aims I have in view, but which I cannot make known to you.

"I am acting in what I do for you, to save your life and the lives of others."

"You have shown that."

"Now you tell me you have as prisoner the most desperate man in this valley."

"How many are here?"

"That I will not tell you."

"As you please."

"With Talbot your prisoner, I frankly tell you that you shall not leave this valley, and I mean it."

The scout laughed, but said:

"I owe it to you of course to be governed by you in this; but how am I to release the man and he not know that I am befriended by you?"

She was thoughtful for an instant and then said:

"Let me tell you just how you can do it."

"Had we best not go to one side, for fear of some one passing here?"

"No, for not a man of the outfit will ride through this valley at night."

"Indeed! yet why?"

"I cannot explain their superstitious dread of the valley, but certain it is the chief, if not compelled to do so, will not pass through this valley at night."

"That is strange; but we are safe here?"

"Yes."

"And my prisoner?"

"You remain here for some little time, and then return to him."

"Bring him here then, and let him understand that you have secured your own horse, and will not take the chances of taking him out with you.

"Let him know that you are aware of a way of leaving the valley, and say that he must remain here bound until his comrades come along to-morrow to release him."

"Then I am to leave him here?"

"You are."

"I could just as well take him along with me."

"Never with my consent."

"Then I yield to you."

"I am glad to have you say so, for I do not wish to regret having served you, through any act of yours, Buffalo Bill."

"I am ready now to obey your commands."

"Well, here is your horse, and your haversack is full, and your canteen also, so that you will not suffer.

"Your horse and all were put in the corral, the men not expecting you to again get possession of him, so I went after him early and so secured him.

"When you bring your prisoner here, he will see that you have your horse and suppose that you went after him."

"It will be a terrible night for Talbot to spend here alone, for he too dreads the darkness in this valley; but I guess he will survive it.

"Now let me say that when you leave your

man here, mount your horse and come on up the trail until I join you."

"I will do so."

"I will wait for you a quarter of a mile from here, and put you on the trail to get out of the valley by the secret pass I spoke of."

"You are very kind."

"No, I am only just."

"But there is one thing you must submit to."

"What is that?"

"When I meet you up the trail I shall blindfold you, and only when you are out of the valley will I remove the bandage from your eyes."

"You agree to this do you not?"

"Yes."

"I will see that no harm befalls you, as before."

"Now I will walk on down the trail and you leave your horse here and go after your prisoner."

"Will I have been gone long enough for him to feel that I have had time to go where they had put my horse?"

"Yes, it is not far from here," and the girl walked away, while Buffalo Bill having hitched his horse to a tree near by went toward the cliffs where he had left his prisoner.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE START.

"WELL, Talbot, I am back again, and in spite of your boasted watchfulness and having a good sized band, I have been able to secure my captured horse and outfit," said Buffalo Bill as he reached the side of his prisoner.

Of course the outlaw could not reply, but the scout sat down by his side and began to remove the gag from his mouth, while he continued:

"Now you may be right that I could not break through the guards at the passes, that they would prove too strong for me, so I will change my plans and leave by a way where there are no sentinels on duty."

"You cannot find such a way, for there is none," said the outlaw, getting the use once more of his power of speech, though his voice was husky and throat dry.

"I'll take chances on doing so, and I only regret I will be unable to take you with me."

"You will not kill me?" gasped the man excitedly.

"Oh, no, I am no murderer, though I believe you deserve death if ever man did."

"I shall leave you bound in the trail until your comrades find you."

"I can but thank you for what you are compelled to do."

"Well, we may meet again some day, and any indebtedness you may consider me under to you I will endeavor to cancel."

"You are not out of the valley yet."

"True, yet I soon will be."

"If you care to make a bet on it I'll wager a clean hundred you do not get out."

"I'll take the bet, and when we meet again will pay it if I lose, or collect from you if I win."

"It's a bargain."

"But why won't you let me go on to my camp?"

"I prefer to get a good start on my way before my getting out of the valley is known."

The outlaw made no reply, and Buffalo Bill aided him to mount his horse, then bound his feet securely to the saddle and started for the bowlder.

The outlaw saw then the horse of the scout and any doubt he might have had as to his having secured the animal faded from his mind and he said:

"You have indeed gotten your horse."

"Oh yes, I am not afraid to travel by night as you and your men are."

"Why you are as superstitious about the night as Indians are."

"What makes you think we will not move at night?"

"Do you?"

"I have no answer to make."

"Well, you may be sure that you will not travel this night," and Buffalo Bill hitched his horse to a tree in such a way as to thoroughly secure him.

"Now, Talbot, I'll be off, and let me warn you that our next meeting may not terminate as this has done, for it will be your life or mine."

"It will be your life, Buffalo Bill; and I'll win my bet of a hundred."

"You do not intend to gag me again, I hope?"

"Yes, for you will be unable to call for help, and you know there are men not very far away— Hold! if you dare to raise your voice now I'll drive my bowie-knife to the hilt in your heart," and the scout whipped out the long blade and held it over the man, who had intended to call for help.

But the determined act of Buffalo Bill checked him very quickly and he remained silent.

With a stick and scarf the scout then once more securely gagged his prisoner, after which he mounted his own horse and rode on up the trail, to the surprise of Talbot going toward the retreat of the outlaws.

A quarter of a mile down the trail Buffalo Bill came upon the Girl Guide standing in his path and awaiting his coming.

"You have not harmed him?" she asked, quickly, as he rode up and dismounted.

"I could no more harm a man at my mercy, miss, than I could strike you," was the reproachful response of the scout.

"I beg you to forgive me."

"Certainly."

"I left him tied to his horse, and gagged, to await release in the morning."

"Very well, come with me now, as soon as I have blindfolded you."

"You will ride and I will lead your horse, and you are not to speak until I give you permission."

"I shall obey, believe me."

"Then I shall not have to gag you," was the smiling response of Buffalo Bill's Mascot.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THROUGH DARKNESS TO LIGHT.

THE fair young guide did not go along as though she dreaded discovery, but with a bold step, leading the scout's horse after her.

She seemed to feel sure in the fact that the mysterious dwellers in Death Valley would not go abroad after nightfall, and that she would meet no one to cause alarm.

She turned from the trail she was following, after going a short distance, going up a narrow canyon.

This grew deeper and deeper as she went, along until at last the cliffs almost met overhead.

At last, when the darkness grew so intense in the chasm that the stars overhead were all that could be seen, she halted and the scout heard the lighting of a match though he could see nothing.

There appeared before her, as she lighted a lantern she carried, what looked like the end of the canyon.

But she went boldly up to the seeming rock and drawing it aside it proved to be a piece of painted canvas, revealing a cave beneath, which was large enough to admit a horse.

"You must dismount here."

The scout did so.

"Now catch hold of my hand, and you lead your horse."

The scout did as directed, and, lantern in hand, the girl led the way through a long cavern that was as even as a tunnel.

The scout's instinct told him that he was passing through a cave, but he made no remark, simply following his guide, holding the hand she had placed behind her.

Five, ten, fifteen minutes passed, and the cavern seemed to have no end.

But at last there came a breath of fresh, pure air, and the fair guide halted in an opening that overlooked a small stream.

The rocks were so piled up here that the entrance to the cavern could not have been seen fifty feet away.

"Mount here," she said, and Buffalo Bill obeyed, still keeping silence.

"I will have to mount behind you," she said.

"Certainly; can I aid you?"

"No," and she leaped lightly to a seat behind his saddle.

"Now ride straight forward for a few steps and then give your horse his rein."

This Buffalo Bill did, and a hundred yards further on the animal came out of the stream upon a gravel plain, which left no trace of a hoof-track.

The girl urged the horse forward for several hundred yards, and then she leaped lightly to the ground, while she said:

"We part here."

"Am I still to remain blindfolded?"

In answer she removed the bandage from his eyes and said:

"No, you are free now to see what you can, and to go your way at will."

"Yonder lies the fort, and I would advise that you push right on, for you may be followed."

"I will do so."

"Remember your promise about not coming here for six months."

"I will not forget it, nor will I forget you, and all you have done for me."

The girl made no reply, and so the scout added:

"You have heard nothing of my companion whom I left in the canyon, and who so mysteriously disappeared?"

"Nothing."

"He must have been killed then?"

"No, or I should have heard of it."

"Good-by, Buffalo Bill," and she extended her hand.

The scout grasped it warmly, and she said:

"Now go, for I will remain here until I see you disappear in the distance."

"Some day we will meet again, and then it will be my chance to aid you."

She was silent and Buffalo Bill raised his sombrero and rode away for he felt that she was anxious to get rid of him.

Until his form grew misty in the distance the girl remained standing where he had left her.

Then she retraced her way to the stream and without a moment's hesitation walked straight into the flowing waters, which arose to her waist as she crossed to the other shore where she entered the cavern through which she had led Buffalo Bill to safety and freedom.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SACRIFICE.

BACK through the cavern went the mysterious girl, who, though she would not betray those among whom she dwelt, yet would not allow the life of Buffalo Bill to be forfeited.

She came out of the cave where the canvas protected it from view, walked rapidly down the canyon and turning to the right soon came to a corral in which were a number of horses.

One of these she selected, and springing upon the animal's bare back, rode back to the trail where she had left it to go to the canyon where she was guiding Buffalo Bill.

The nature of the ground just there was such that a trail could be traced by daylight, where elsewhere it could not in the course she had followed in guiding the scout.

She seemed to be as particular in leaving a trail, when she turned off, as she had in the selection of a horse from the corral, for she had secured one that was shod.

Up a winding path she went for half a mile or more, and at last came out upon a ridge which formed a natural wall on the west of Death Valley.

Along this she rode for some distance, and entering a heavy growth of timber, halted on the brink of a precipice.

It was a cliff split in twain, and through it dashed a foaming torrent several hundred feet below.

The roar was terrific as the waters surged along through the rocky chasm, and the spray arose like smoke above the brink of the cliff.

Across this chasm, which was some sixty or seventy feet in width, was a narrow bridge, anchored on either side with ropes to steady it.

A flimsy rail on either side formed the only protection toward going off, and it was not over four feet in width.

Dismounting from her horse, the girl secured him so that he could not stray away, and then walked out upon the bridge.

In the center the flooring had been torn up

for the space of ten feet, but the poles that formed it, a flash of her lantern revealed, were upon the other side, ready for use again when needed.

Having noted this fact, she returned to her horse, and, patting him gently upon the neck, said, in a voice full of feeling:

"It is a pity to sacrifice you, good horse, but the dumb brute must serve the human being at all times, and Buffalo Bill must be thought dead."

"It must be believed that he escaped this way, and, not knowing that the flooring of this pine bridge was up, rode into the opening, and, with his horse, went down to death."

"Your trail, poor fellow, will be mistaken for that of the scout's horse, and that is what I wish, for no one must be suspected in this matter, for that would mean death to the one upon whom suspicion fell."

She then blindfolded her horse with her scarf, and led him upon the bridge.

Going behind him then she urged him on and the animal cautiously advanced, the bridge swaying beneath his weight and motion to what would be an alarming extent to one not accustomed to take big chances.

Driving the horse onward the girl guide suddenly sprung backward and ran for the solid bank, for the blindfolded animal had made the step to find nothing but space beneath his hoof, had plunged forward, made a desperate effort to recover himself, and then went headlong through the opening while a loud snort rung out on the night air.

Standing upon the bank the girl covered her eyes with her hands to shut out the dread scene, and then there came to her ears a cry almost human in its pathetic tone, followed by a loud splash as the horse struck the surging waters and was whirled away by the fierce current.

It was several moments before the girl could collect her nerves and get control of herself again.

But she shook off the feeling upon her and retreated down the steep hill and up the valley.

A few hours after, just as the sun arose above the mountain-tops, she was dashing down the valley upon her morning ride which she always took before breakfast.

But this morning she had more of a purpose in view than her ride, for she was dashing down the valley to the spot where the scout had left the bound and gagged outlaw, for to be the first one to find him had been her great desire, when she went to her retreat after the plot to let it be thought that Buffalo Bill had ridden through the opening in the bridge across the chasm.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE DISCOVERY.

TALBOT had certainly passed a most wretched night of it.

He was superstitious, and so, afraid to be alone there in the valley, which he had aided in giving a very dreadful name.

He was bound in his saddle and gagged, so that he was bodily uncomfortable as well as suffering in mind.

When, after what what seemed to him a lifetime of horror, the dawn broke he felt happy, his face lighting up with hope when he saw the sun peering over the mountain.

Some one must soon come along that way, he felt sure, and relieve him from his sad plight.

He was right in his surmise, for some one did soon appear.

It was the mysterious woman who roamed the valley seemingly at will.

She played her part well, for going down the valley at a gallop, she quickly drew rein when she saw Talbot.

Then she reconnoitered before she advanced, but, apparently at last recognizing him, she rode forward and leaping from her horse called out with well feigned surprise:

"Why, Talbot, what does this mean?"

The man could only shake his head in reply.

"You, bound and gagged?"

"Have the men done this?"

As she spoke she untied the gag and took it from his mouth, when he gave a deep sigh of relief.

She then hastily gave him a drink from his canteen, and began to untie his feet and hands.

It was not long before he was free, but it was quite a while before he could speak, as his throat and tongue were swollen from the gag.

When at last he could speak his voice was husky, and his first utterance was an oath.

This seemed to cause him to feel better, and he was ready and willing to answer questions, and said:

"I believe I'd have died, Queen, if you had not come along as you did."

"Oh, no, not so bad as that, for you were not hurt."

"But tell me what it means?"

"It means that I was held up by Buffalo Bill."

"By Buffalo Bill?"

"Sure."

"But he is a fugitive somewhere in the valley."

"He has left the valley by the bridge trail, for he held me up last night and left me tied while he went to the corral and got his horse and outfit which the men had found in Graveyard Canyon."

"And he has gone?"

"He started up the trail, and if he has not escaped then he is hiding somewhere in the valley."

"I will ride at once and give the alarm at the retreat," and the girl leaped lightly into her saddle.

"No hurry now, for if he's out, then we cannot catch him, and if he is in the valley then we must catch him, that is all."

"He's a dangerous man, Talbot."

"I should think he was dangerous, and if he's gone, then we will hear from him before very long. I am certain," and the man also mounted his horse and rode back with the girl up the valley.

They had not gone very far when Talbot, who was an excellent trailer, halted and said:

"See there!"

"Yes."

"He has turned off by the bridge trail."

"There are tracks."

"Yes, and we will ride up now to the bridge and see if the trail can be found upon the other side."

They rode up the hill together, and at last came to the bridge across the chasm.

Talbot sprung from his horse, examined the tracks an instant, and then ran eagerly upon the bridge to the gap in it.

A quick glance he gave and then from his lips broke a wild, exultant yell, while he waved his sombrero around and around his head.

"What is it, Talbot?" cried the girl, also dismounting and joining him where he stood upon the bridge, his face the very picture of joy.

His answer came in tones that could not be mistaken in their joyousness:

"The bridge gap was open and Buffalo Bill rode to his doom! See! his horse went down here, carrying his rider to Perdition."

"Hurrah! hurrah!" and the man shouted loudly in his fiendish delight at the supposed death of his implacable foe.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DESERT TRAIL.

WHILE Talbot was rejoicing over the belief that Buffalo Bill had ridden to his doom, through the gap in the swinging bridge, the scout was pressing along on his way to the fort, leaving far behind him the dangerous and mysterious Death Valley.

When left by the Girl Guide to go his way alone, he had continued on at a slow pace, now and then glancing back to see if his Mascot was out of sight.

At last he said with considerable earnestness:

"Well! I am at last safe out of that really fatal valley, and I owe it to that young girl that I am now alive."

"What a Death Valley it really is, and who are the mysterious dwellers there?"

"Outlaws of course, yet what keeps them there, for whom have they to prey upon in that far-away region?"

"I feel that there is some deep mystery underlying all this that it is hard to fathom."

"But fathomed it must be, and though I

promised the girl I would not return for six months, I did not say that no one else would.

"She stated her time, and meant to have matters so at the end of six months that there would be no mystery there then to hunt down.

"That man who thought I repeated the oath after him, the girl, the chief, and the band of outlaws all have some strong reason for sojourning there, and what it is shall be known, though I am unable to go on the hunt for it.

"But I know who will, and that is Frank Powell, the Surgeon Scout

"He is about the best man I know to follow a blind trail, an' I'll just draw him a map of the valley, give him all the information I can, and he can dash in there at dawn some morning with a troop of cavalry, and wipe out the outlaws and have their secret.

"Come, old horse, you have had a good rest, so now push for the fort with all the speed you can make it in."

He urged his horse into a canter, and over the barren plain kept the gait up for hour after hour.

It was just growing light when he came to a "well" in the rock formed by pebbles and worn to the depths of several feet by the action of the water in the rainy season.

There was not a blade of grass near, and no trees, but an old wagon-wheel broken in pieces made wood for a fire and the scout found a bag tied to his saddle in which there was a small feed of green grass, which his horse would relish.

"That girl provided well," he said to himself, as he gave the horse half the grass for his meal and then cooked his own breakfast and ate heartily for he was hungry.

He carried the remains of his firewood along with him, when he started, and filled his canteens at the pool, for he knew it would not be until the next morning when he could again find water or wood in that desert land.

He had left Volcano Peak far to his right and it was now behind him as he rode along.

His pace was a steady one, and as he went along he could not but wonder what brave hearts men had possessed, to cross that desolate, waterless, treeless, grassless plain in search of frontier homes.

Many had been the deaths there from starvation, and the emigrants who had pushed on toward Death Valley had never been heard of more, so were set down as lost.

At night the scout halted upon the desert near a pile of volcanic rocks.

His horse was given the contents of one of the canteens, which the scout poured down his throat, and the balance of the grass packed in the bag was all the supper he got.

The rider fared better, for he cooked his supper upon the remains of the old wagon-wheel, and the other canteen furnished him with water for his coffee.

Then he laid down to sleep and his patient horse did the same, seemingly resigned to the fact that he was upon short rations of feed and water.

At midnight Buffalo Bill arose and pressed on, and when the sun rose he came upon a stream, where there were patches of grass and driftwood, and here he went into camp.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A SURPRISE FOR BUFFALO BILL.

BUFFALO BILL camped on the river-bank until late in the afternoon, giving his horse a chance to get a good fill of water and grass, and himself a rest.

Then, with the bag filled with grass which he had gathered, and his canteens supplied, he pushed on once more, well aware that it was another long ride over the desert before he came to where the country was such that man and beast could subsist in it.

It was on the next afternoon that the nature of the country began to change, and at the camp that night there was wood, water and grass in abundance.

But if food was plenty, there was added danger now to the scout, as he was in an Indian country, and had to be very careful not to run upon a roving band of them.

In the desert he had no such dread, for they would not go there.

He was riding along after night, knowing that it was safest to travel then, when Indians would not be prowling about, when in the distance he spied the glimmer of a light.

He knew that it came from a camp upon the Little Colorado River.

Losing sight of the light almost immediately, he halted and began to investigate.

It might be a couple of his scouts, or a scouting party of cavalry, but most likely it was a band of red-skins.

"The chances are ten to one that it is a band of red-skins," he muttered.

As he no longer saw the light of the camp-fire, he rode back to where it had first caught his eye, and soon got a glimpse of it again.

Turning his glass upon it, he managed to make out that it was over a mile away, and was a camp-fire in a small canyon, where the light would not be visible except from the position he was then in.

Riding slowly forward, the scout guided his way by keeping the camp-fire in sight.

After riding for some distance, he halted again and investigated with his field-glass.

He saw several forms moving to and fro, and said:

"Indians!"

Then he dismounted and staked his horse out to feed, while he cautiously went forward on foot.

Drawing nearer, he saw that the camp was across the river, in a small canyon of the hill country on the other side.

There was timber there, and some meadow land, and the scout thought that he saw some horses feeding upon the latter.

As he looked he saw an Indian's form plainly defined between him and the fire-light.

Confident that there were a number of them there, and with his horse and himself well worn out, he concluded to simply reconnoiter sufficiently to see what their force was and then go on to the fort and report the fact.

To do this he must approach much nearer.

As the camp was on the other side of the stream he was in no immediate danger of running upon them, and yet the scout was most cautious in his approach.

At last he gained a position among a clump of cottonwood trees and not three hundred yards from the camp-fire.

It was built up in a canyon, and there were some half-dozen of Indians about it eating their supper.

That there was a guard over their ponies feeding upon the meadow, of a couple or more braves the scout was satisfied, while upon the hill above the camp there would naturally be a sentinel on duty.

"About ten all told," muttered the scout, and he leveled his glass upon the camp to take a deliberate survey of it and its surroundings.

Hardly had he gazed half a minute through the field glass when he uttered an exclamation of surprise, which ended in a muttered imprecation.

This was caused by a discovery which he had made, and it was one that seemed to move him more than his own danger in the Valley of Death had done.

What he saw was a white man seated by the little camp-fire, and that he was a prisoner was certain as his hands were bound behind him, and more, the scout recognized the man who was in the power of the red-skins.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A PARD IN DANGER.

THE little fire in the canyon was bright enough to reveal all near it with distinctness, and Buffalo Bill had a good view through his field-glass of the Indians and their prisoner.

This prisoner was a man clad in fatigue uniform, upon his shoulders being the straps of an officer, and upon his head he wore a black army hat with a sable plume.

He was seated upon a stone, and both his feet and hands were securely bound.

The prisoner, though an army officer, wore his hair long, as it fell in thick waves below his shoulders.

The scout, having discovered that the In-

dians had a pale-face prisoner, was not long in making up his mind as to just what he would do.

That the red-skins would encamp there for the night he was assured, and so he decided to make a flank movement, gaining the hill country across the stream and approaching the camp from the overhanging cliffs.

He knew that there was a ford some miles below, and a trail leading over the hills, so he took another careful survey of the surroundings and then went back to his horse.

Mounting, he turned off down the stream, pressing his horse into a canter, and after going several miles came to a ford made by wild animals in crossing and recrossing the stream.

He filled his canteen, gave his horse a refreshing draught of water, and then pushed on into the hill in an oblique way, making his own trail.

Again it was a ride of several miles, and he found himself half a mile from the river and just in the rear of the canyon where the Indians were encamped.

He staked his horse out and took from his saddle a small bugle, hanging it about his neck by the cord.

Then he set out cautiously to approach the Indian camp.

His knowledge of the Indian nature told him that they had a sentinel in the hills over the camp, and his first duty was to find that red-skin.

If he could surprise him the chances were that he could reach the camp and spread panic among the Indians, but, if the sentinel detected him first he might have to act on the defensive and ruin all chances of rescuing the prisoner, for that was his firm resolve.

So, with the noiseless manner of a panther approaching his prey, and the patience of an Indian, he began to creep upon the position where he expected to find the sentinel.

He saw just the faintest glimmer of a firelight against the top of the cliff, and then moved about until he caught sight of the red-skin he was looking for.

The Indian sentinel was standing with his back to a small quaking-aspen tree, and his face was toward the camp, as though he longed to be down there with his comrades.

Buffalo Bill knew, as he took in the situation, that the chances of surprising the red-skin by getting up to him were slim.

But he must make the attempt at least, and if discovered, then he would have to shoot him and trust to his bugle to give the others a belief that they were surprised by cavalry.

By a rapid fire down upon them from the cliff overhanging the camp, he might be able to put them to flight and cause them to desert their prisoner to save themselves.

This was his plan if he failed to get up close to the Indian sentinel and grapple with him.

Could he do this then he trusted to his own strength to get away with the red-skin without allowing him to give an alarm to his comrades.

Having discovered the Indian's position the scout moved forward with a caution born of long experience upon the frontier, and the grim determination that no life should stand between him and the rescue of his best friend, for the one who was a prisoner in the hands of the Indians he had recognized as his pard of many a trail, one whose life he had before saved, one to whom he owed it time and again that he had not been killed, a man among men, Frank Powell, the Surgeon Scout.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE SCOUT AND THE SENTINEL.

How Frank Powell, the Surgeon Scout, had fallen into the hands of the Indians Buffalo Bill could not understand, for few men were his equal as a trailer and borderman and none possessed greater pluck and indomitable nerve.

But there he was, the surgeon of the fort, a prisoner, bound hands and feet, and what his fate would be, could his captors get him to their village, was very readily understood.

But he must be rescued and thus saved, and to do this Buffalo Bill was not a man to count odds.

His own life he would gladly risk to save any one, and how much more would he chance to save his pard, the Surgeon Scout!

So he moved toward the Indian sentinel step by step.

So slowly did he go that he hardly progressed a couple of steps in a minute.

He did not raise his feet from the ground, for fear of putting them down upon a dry twig that would break and betray him.

Were it a white man on duty the scout would have expected him to soon change his position.

But an Indian will sit, or stand, perfectly still in one position for a long while, and the sentinel might not move for an hour.

But Buffalo Bill did not take chances, and his rifle was ready, and cocked, to drop the Indian the instant he should discover him.

Nearer and nearer he drew, and the red-skin still remained like a statue.

He leant against the quaking-asp and his back was toward the scout.

If danger came to the camp it was expected from that direction, yet the Indian did not appear to dread the presence of any foe near, and watched the cheery reflection of the fire against the cliff rather than the hill-land behind him where death was lurking for him.

Nearer and nearer the scout approached the Indian until he had to suppress his breathing for fear it would be heard by the keen ear of the savage.

At last but ten feet only parted him from the red-skin, and the scout halted.

He had no fear of himself, for his dread was only that he might not prevent the alarm being given before he could get his clutch upon the throat of the sentinel.

If he had to shoot him that meant an alarm that might destroy his chances of rescuing the Surgeon Scout.

There was a slight unevenness in the ground between the scout and the Indian, and there was a chance that the little hollow was deeper than it looked and a fall would betray all.

But the scout continued his noiseless, sliding movement with his feet, down the slight declivity and up the other side, until he stood within almost arm's reach of his foe.

The Indian still stood with his back to the tree, and now the scout discovered that the chin rested upon his breast, that the head was bent forward and the red-skin was fast asleep on duty.

Buffalo Bill gave a sigh of relief, gently stooped and laid down his rifle, and then, in an instant more his iron grip was upon the throat of the sleeping red sentinel.

There was a hoarse gurgle, as a cry was stifled, then began a fight for life.

The Indian was a large, powerfully-built man, but the scout's hold upon his throat was one he could not shake off, and it was crushing the life out of him.

The red-skin at once had grasped his knife, and the scout's other hand had gripped his wrist with iron force.

The struggle, if long, would surely attract attention Buffalo Bill well knew, and he at once determined to end the fight as soon as possible, so he thrust his enemy backward, tripped him and he fell upon his back in the little ditch spoken of.

The scout fell on top of him, but was compelled to release the wrist of the Indian in the fall.

Instantly the body of the Indian relaxed, and Buffalo Bill was not long in discovering the cause, for the red-skin had fallen upon his own knife, as he put his hand behind him to break his fall, and the long blade had pierced his heart.

Buffalo Bill arose to his feet in silence, and stood gazing down upon his dead foe, while he felt a thrill of triumph at having the barrier on the cliff in the rescue of the Surgeon Scout at least out of the way.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

THE tension to which the scout's every nerve had been drawn, and the tax upon his strength in the death-struggle, had told upon even his splendid physique, and it was several minutes before he could regain full control of himself.

At last he was successful, his muscles ceased to twitch, his nerves to quiver, and

he was once more his calm self, ready for any emergency.

He knew that it must be midnight, and that a sentinel would come to relieve the one on the cliff, the one who was off duty forever, so that he must be on the watch.

To be upon the safe side, he took the Indian's head-dress and put it on, wrapping his blanket about him, and so approached the cliff.

Did a relief guard come up, by some path known to the Indians, thus seeing him rigged out, he would naturally suppose that it was his comrade, and feel no fear of him.

Approaching the cliff, the scout glanced over cautiously and looked down into the little canyon.

The fire was burning low, but there was light enough to count seven forms about it, wrapped in blankets excepting one.

That one was the Surgeon Scout, and he lay upon the ground with nothing beneath him for protection, no covering over him.

An Indian sentinel sat upon a rock near, watching the prisoner, though he was securely bound, but all the others were asleep.

With his glass peering out upon the meadow beyond the mouth of the canyon, Buffalo Bill dimly traced the outlines of the Indian ponies feeding, and knew that there were guards with them.

He had decided to open fire upon the Indian camp by shooting the sentinel seated upon the rock and then drop two or three more as they all sprung to their feet in alarm.

Leaping back, he would then give a bugle call, and that would cause the belief that cavalry were upon them and stampede the band, while from his point of vantage he could protect the Surgeon Scout from any attempt to kill him by picking off any red-skin who made the attempt to do so.

Believing themselves hemmed in, attacked by cavalry, the red-skins would stampede for their ponies to make their escape with all dispatch, and the scout could remain master of the situation.

It was a clever, bold plot at rescue, and for Buffalo Bill to plan was to carry out to a successful termination in most cases.

When the life of the Surgeon Scout was at stake Buffalo Bill was the more anxious that there should be no failure of his plot.

He had just decided to act, and was rising to his feet to get his rifle and draw a bead upon the sentinel in the canyon, whom he hated to kill without a warning or danger to himself, when he was startled by a word spoken at his side.

In an instant he realized the danger he was in, for it was the Indian sentinel who had come up to relieve the guard on the cliff.

The red-skin had seen him lying there and gazing over the cliff into the canyon, so evidently supposed it was his comrade, and asleep.

So he crept forward to give him a fright, when Buffalo Bill arose.

Unfortunately for the Indian he was within a couple of feet of the edge of the cliff, and when he spoke the scout realized the situation with lightning-like quickness and acted.

His action was to strike the legs of the red-skin a terrific blow that knocked them from under him and he went backward over the edge of the cliff, while from his lips broke a wild, thrilling cry of despair, as he knew he was dashing to his death upon the rocks a hundred feet below.

Without waiting to note the effect of the red-skin's fall, almost into the camp of his comrades, Buffalo Bill threw his rifle to his shoulder, and just as the sentinel on the rock sprung to his feet sent a bullet crashing through his brain.

Springing back he then placed the little bugle to his lips and sounded a call which rung wildly out on the night air.

Dropping his bugle he gave his own well-known war-cry and was back at his post upon the cliff ready to protect the Surgeon Scout from any death-blow his captors might give him before stampeding in their flight for their ponies.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE TWO PARDS.

IT was well that Buffalo Bill realized that it was necessary for him to protect the prisoner from the frightened savages, for just as he

appeared upon the cliff again, one of the Indians was about to deal a death-blow with his tomahawk upon the head of the defenseless Surgeon Scout.

A sharp report and the bullet from the scout's rifle shattered the hand of the savage, while several shots were fired in rapid succession to further increase the fright of the Indians.

They had the desired effect, for, with the dead, the one who had fallen from the cliff writhing in agony but a few paces distant, and one of their comrades with a bullet shattered hand, the remainder stood not on the order of going but went at once.

They darted out of the canyon, leaving their prisoner and their blankets, with their camping outfit as well.

The scout gave again and again his startling war-cry, known so well upon the frontier, and ran along the cliff top to fire upon the retreating Indians as they rushed for their horses, though he fired at random.

Then he once more gave a bugle-call as a further means of startling the braves, and the rapid clatter of hoofs told him that he had been successful, for the Indians rushed madly for the river and the plunging of their ponies into the stream soon reached the ears of Buffalo Bill.

Finding the trail the sentinels had followed to the top of the cliff, Buffalo Bill rapidly bounded down it to the plains below, and, running from point to point with great speed, fired first his rifle, then his revolvers, to let the Indians see the flashes and believe there were a number of men in the attack.

Pressing on down toward the river across the meadow, Buffalo Bill saw two dark forms which he at once knew to be horses left by the red-skins in their flight, they not taking time to gather up all of the animals.

Going up to one of the animals he found by the stake a saddle and bridle and he cried: "Good! it is the doctor's horse!"

To throw the saddle upon the animal, put the bridle on and mount him was an instant's work, and the scout dashed up to the Indian pony staked near, those two having been apart from the others.

The pony was quickly secured and away went Buffalo Bill at all speed toward the canyon.

There lay the Surgeon Scout securely bound and unable to free himself, but as he saw who his rescuer was, he uttered a war-cry and called out:

"Bravo, Bill!"

"I knew that war-cry of yours when I heard it upon the cliff."

"Come, Doc, there is not a second to lose, for there are eight of those fellows left yet, and they will soon be back when they find they are not pursued, so we must be off, for my horse is a mile from here the way we have to go."

As he spoke he cut the rawhide lariat that bound the Surgeon Scout so securely and aided him to mount, for the rescued prisoner was benumbed from the bonds that had been drawn so tight.

Throwing a few of the Indian's traps upon the captured pony, Buffalo Bill leaped upon his back and led the way out of the canyon at a gallop.

Along the cliff they rode for a quarter of a mile until they found a trail leading up into the hills which they turned into just as the Indians uttered a series of wild cries and began to cross the river.

"They have been reinforced, Bill!"

"You think so, Doc, for I believe they know they have discovered the weakness of the rescuing party and are coming back to attack us."

"No, for there is no weakness in the rescuing party, Bill, as I have good reason to know."

"No, they had another band of half a hundred which retreated by the valley trail and were to join them here, for that I heard them arrange."

"You are right, Frank, for there are a large number of horses coming across the stream to make all that noise."

"We must ride for it now and reach my horse, after which we can dodge them if they do not crowd us too close," and Buffalo Bill led the way to the spot where he had left his horse, the Surgeon Scout following close at his heels and warming up after his having been so long tied and helpless.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE CHASE.

BUFFALO BILL saw that Surgeon Powell found it no easy task to remain in the saddle.

His feet were almost lifeless from the tight bonds that were upon them, and his hands were in a like condition.

Then too with no covering, and lying upon the damp ground, the doctor had become chilled through to the bone.

But the movement of his horse warmed him by degrees and he was feeling better by the time the scout reached his horse.

Dismounting, Buffalo Bill took the extra weight upon his own and Surgeon Powell's horse, and, with his lariat bound it upon the Indian pony, which was a fine animal and would save the two large horses in the race for life, which both men knew now it must be, as there was one means of escape only and that along the top of the ridge.

The Indians were heard pressing on, seeming to know the country well and aware of the fact that they had been cleverly outwitted and run off by but one man.

Their yells and the clatter of hoofs told Buffalo Bill that the other band, which Surgeon Powell had said was half a hundred strong, had joined those who had had the prisoner in charge.

The ridge was a rough one and hard to make good time over, while it ran that way for several miles.

Then came a steep descent to the prairie land beyond, but in descending the scout knew was their danger as the red-skins would be able to fire down upon them at short range.

Could they have gained the prairie far ahead of the Indians they knew that they could have eluded them; but, within sight of the red-skins they would be hard pressed.

"I am not able to handle a weapon yet, Bill, so you will have to do the fighting while I help you with the running," said the Surgeon Scout as they went along as rapidly as the nature of the ground would permit.

"All right, Frank, when we reach the end of the ridge, if they press us, I will let you go ahead with the horses while I give them a check, for I can descend faster on foot."

"No, you will go down with me, for I will not leave you, and besides there are too many of them for you to check even for a minute."

"Were they but the small force that had me a prisoner we both might make a stand and with success."

"I guess you are right, Frank."

"We must run for it as our only hope."

They pushed steadily on, but were most cautious as they did not know the pit-falls in their way.

The Surgeon Scout had been over the trail with his captors, early in the afternoon, but Buffalo Bill had not been, and the doctor warned him that the way was a dangerous one, full of holes which might throw their horses and cripple them and perhaps hurt the riders seriously.

The Indians evidently were better used to the trail, for they came on more rapidly, and their ponies got over the rough ground with greater ease than did the two large horses of the pards.

So the flight continued until at last the end of the ridge was reached and the descent begun.

It was a ride of a half a mile down the hill, in a zig-zag course and the scouts were but half way down when the Indians appeared upon the trail above.

They saw, by the starlight, the two men going down the hill and with wild yells sent a shower of arrows after them, while they also began to descend, dismounting and leading their ponies.

The arrows flew about the two friends with ominous whirring sound and struck the rocky path with a sound like the pattering of huge drops of rain.

"I'll remind them that we are at least around," said Buffalo Bill, who had reloaded his weapons, and Surgeon Powell added:

"And soon I hope my hands will be able to grasp a weapon."

"Yes, for I brought you rifle and revolvers, which the red-skins left in camp when they fled."

As he spoke Buffalo Bill turned in his sad-

dle and sent a dozen shots from his Winchester repeating-rifle rattling back up the hill at the savages.

A pony fell, and there were savage cries from the Indians, which told that one at least of the shots had taken effect upon a brave as well as a horse, though fired almost at random.

Then the return fire came, and once more the arrows rattled about the fugitives, while accompanying them were half a dozen bullets from those of the Indians who possessed firearms.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WOUNDED.

THE two scouts pressed on in silence, after the return fire of the red-skins, devoting their every energy to the descent of the dangerous hill.

On came the Indians, all of them leading their ponies, and enabled, by their knowledge of the trail, to cut off here and there a few rods.

At last the level land was reached, the horses were urged into a gallop, and rapidly they drew away from the Indians.

"Had that hill dragged out a couple of hundred yards further, Bill, it would have been a fight to the death."

"It certainly would have been, Doc."

"But we are all right now."

"Yes, I guess so," and the two horses and Indian pony were pressed on more rapidly.

"The pony does not keep up well, Bill," said Frank Powell, as the Indian horse dragged heavily back upon his lead line.

"No, and for a reason."

"Ah! he is wounded, then?"

"Yes, one of those arrows plugged him."

"Too bad, but we can do without him if he drops out, for the Indians will not follow us far over the prairie."

"No, I think not, and I sincerely hope so, for I got it as well as the pony, Frank."

"You wounded, Bill?" cried the surgeon, in alarm.

"Yes, slightly in my arm, but it is bleeding freely."

"We must look to this as soon as we dare halt."

"We will press on for awhile yet, Frank, and I'll stand it unless I feel I am getting weak," coolly said Buffalo Bill.

So on they rode for half a mile further when the Indian pony began to sway badly, and it was decided to halt and take the traps from off his back.

The hands of the Surgeon Scout were now regaining their usefulness and so he aided in stripping the pony, which went down the moment they halted.

"Bill."

"Yes, Doc."

"They have given up the chase."

"You are right," said Buffalo Bill, giving a glance back over the prairie, where the Indians could be seen going toward the ridge once more.

The Surgeon Scout then turned his attention to the wound of Buffalo Bill, tying around the arm his handkerchief to prevent the flow of blood, for it was bleeding freely.

Riding on once more for a couple of miles they came to a timber motte, where there was a spring, and here they halted, the first duty of the surgeon being to look after his wounded comrade.

"I must have a light, Bill, so if we build a fire and they see it, we can get away before they come."

"The horses will have a rest, water and a few mouthfuls of grass."

The scout at once set to work at once to build a fire, and the surgeon took from his saddle-pocket the case of instruments, with lint, bandages and arnica that he never went without, and which the Indians had not robbed him of when they captured him.

The scout had a bright fire burning in a few minutes and throwing off his hunting-coat he bared his arm for the surgeon to examine the wound.

"The arrow was not poisoned, fortunately, Bill, or there would already have been inflammation."

"It ran in to the bone, but will not be serious I think," and the surgeon probed the wound, Buffalo Bill standing the pain without a word.

Then the wound was dressed, "bandaged and in twenty minutes the two were ready to mount and continue on their way."

They were just in time too, as the Indians from the hill having seen the fire, came to the conclusion that the scouts supposed they had given up the chase, so had gone into camp.

"See there, Frank," said Bill, pointing to a dark mass off on the prairie.

"Yes, they have halted their ponies there, while they are creeping up on us."

"As we are ready to go now, I'll drop a few shots out upon the prairie, about where I think they are, merely to show them we are not such fools as they take us for."

As the Surgeon Scout spoke he raised his rifle to his shoulder, leveled it at about where he supposed there were red-skins creeping toward the little clump of timber, and then he fired half a dozen shots in quick succession.

Wild yells answered the shots and he knew the bullets had hit near, if they had done no damage.

Then the two mounted and dashed out of the timber at a gallop, followed by the wild yells of the foiled savages.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SURGEON SCOUT'S STORY.

WITH the short rest they had had the two horses of the scouts went along at a sweeping gallop and kept up a quick pace for half a dozen miles, when they came to a stream the banks of which were heavily fringed with trees.

Crossing at a buffalo trail the pards turned up the stream and held on for half an hour, when they came into some hill-land where there was wood and water in plenty.

Seeking a camping place which they both knew well, the friends soon had their horses staked out near, where the grass was plentiful, and then a fire was built and they had supper, for both men were hungry.

They had built a fire in a ravine where it could not be seen a short distance away, and when supper had been disposed of they lay down to rest, very sure that the red-skins would not dare follow them beyond the river, if they did that far, for the fort was too near for them to venture with a small force.

The sun was rising when they awoke, and both horses were greatly refreshed by their rest of several hours' sleep and food.

After a hasty breakfast they continued on their way once more, the surgeon having again dressed Buffalo Bill's wounded arm, which was painful, but not serious, both were glad to discover.

As they rode away over the prairies at a steady pace, for there was no cause of hurry now, Buffalo Bill said:

"Doc, how was it that the reds happened to pick up so sly an old plainsman as you are?"

"I'll tell you, Bill, after I make known to you that you surely saved my life, for those red devils intended taking me to their village and there torturing me to death."

"But it is getting to be an old story, your saving my life, yet still I thank you, Bill, from the bottom of my heart."

"Don't speak of thanks, Frank, for I understand all that, and honors are easy between us, I guess, for you have saved me from death time and again."

"Now, how did the red skins catch you?"

"In the simplest way in the world."

"My horse got away from me and I followed him on foot until I was utterly tired out."

"I went into camp and slept so soundly that I did not even waken up until kicked by an Indian."

"Ah!"

"It was to see a dozen red-skins about me, and half-awake I opened fire."

"Well?"

"It was a hard fight, but they downed me, Bill, and so took me with them, and I found that they had picked up my runaway horse also."

"As I had killed a couple of them they were bent on taking me to their village alive, and for fear there might be cavalry in pursuit, sent me one way with the band"

you scared off, while the others went in another direction to meet on the river."

"When was this?"

"Yesterday."

"Where?"

"Over near the river."

"What were you doing so far away, Frank?"

"I was on your trail, Bill."

"Mine?"

"Yes, the colonel said you had gone off alone on a trail, the nature of which he could not guess, and so, as, you did not return in a couple of days, I asked permission to hunt you up."

"Just like you, Frank."

"Oh yes, and I found you too, Bill, or rather you found me."

"That is true, and awful glad am I that I did."

"Now, Frank, how is it that none of the scouts knew this band of sixty warriors were near the fort?"

"They doubtless followed our scouting party in, for I was away, you know, when you left, and the men were not expecting a raid from them."

"Which shows that we must be ever on the watch out here."

"True."

"But do you give an account of yourself, Billy, for I am anxious to know where you have been?"

"I'll tell you, for I have some work for you to do."

"Good."

"What is it, and when to be done?"

"It is for you to guide a troop to Death Valley."

"What?"

"I mean it."

"Why no one goes there, as it is considered certain death to do so."

"True, Frank, but I have been there."

"You, Bill?"

"Yes, I just came from there, and yet I cannot return, as I would wish to do; but you can go, and I wish you to guide a troop there."

"I don't know the country, Bill."

"No one seems to, yet I will post you, for I know it pretty well, and I have maps and all I have drawn for you."

"I'll go," was the firm response of the Surgeon Scout.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TO SOLVE THE SECRET.

"WELL, Frank, as you got into trouble in looking me up, I do not see but that it cancels all gratitude you may feel to me for getting you out of it."

"But do you know, it was a mighty close call," said Buffalo Bill, and the two pards continued on their way.

"I know that it was, a very close call, Bill, and a daring attack like yours only saved me."

"No, not that, for I mean that it was by the merest accident that I saw your camp-fire in the canyon."

"Had I been fifty feet one way or the other off the trail I was following, I would not have seen the fire, for I lost it almost as soon as sighted, and I had to ride back and look it up."

"If it had not been for the glimpse of the fire, I would have ridden right upon the Indian guards over those prairies, for I did not expect to find red-skins in that neighborhood."

"You were in luck, and I doubly so."

"Well, it was luck, and no mistake."

"But now tell me why you were on my trail, Doc?"

"You see the colonel had an idea that you were off on some very dangerous mission, from what he told me, as he said you had kept so quiet about it."

"He asked me if I had any idea where you had gone, and as I had not, I felt the best thing I could do was to strike your trail and see if you did not need help."

"Just like you, Pard Frank."

"But it wasn't like me to get captured, eh?"

"No, though I can understand it more thoroughly now, as I have been caught in the same way."

"But you are ready to act as guide, you

say, to a troop of cavalry into Death Valley?"

"I am, though, as I said, I never have been there."

"Well, I supposed that few others had been."

"And you went into the Valley of Death, Bill?"

"Yes, and came very near staying there."

"You went alone?"

"Oh, yes, but I had more company than I cared for, after I got there."

"Well, what do you wish me to do?"

"I have, as I said, a map of the valley, its passes and trails, with distances and all I was able to discover while there."

"I made notes of it and drew my map at my halt on my way back, so that you will have a fair idea of what to do."

"And not to do?"

"Yes."

"But with all my explanations, when you have heard my story, I feel that you will be able to accomplish what I was unable to do."

"I will try, Bill."

"And trying with you, Frank, means success."

"But there are people in the valley you say?"

"Well, I should think so, a settlement of them."

"Indeed?"

"I never heard of this, though I have heard that several bands of settlers who went there were massacred by the Indians, died of starvation, or were killed by the poisonous vapors the place is reported full of, as well as the waters, which men say are also fatal to any one who drinks of them."

"Frank, I have heard all this too, and for a long while."

"It is common talk about the camps."

"But keep the secret when I tell you that it is all nonsense about poisonous vapors and waters."

"The Indians have massacred people going there, perhaps after they got there, and trains have died of hunger and thirst upon the desert."

"But some people have gotten there and are thriving, for I heard of some thirty, and there may be more."

"Settlers?"

"Heaven only knows what they are, doctor."

"But there is a woman among them, and a handsome girl she is."

"A pretty woman in the case then?"

"Did you ever know of trouble in which there was not a woman in it?"

"No, I never did, from the Garden of Eden up to date," was the surgeon's frank response.

"Well, that girl must be protected and set free when you capture the outfit, along with one whom she will tell you of, a man who befriended me."

"All right, Bill."

"There is one other to look after, but who or what he is I do not know."

"I found him hanging and brought him round, but could learn nothing about him."

"I tell you, Frank, that the Death Valley is full of the weirdest mysteries of any place it was ever my misfortune to run upon."

"We must solve the secret, then, Bill," was the Surgeon Scout's earnest reply.

CHAPTER XL.

THE SCOUT'S REPORT.

WITHOUT further adventure Buffalo Bill arrived at the fort with Surgeon Frank Powell, and they went at once to report to Colonel Merriam, the commandant of the outpost, situated so far upon the frontier and in the midst of deadliest dangers.

They were at once admitted and most warmly welcomed, for Doctor Powell was one of the most popular officers at the post, and his skill as a scout was so well known that he was often allowed to divide his time between scouting and surgery, for he had good assistants to leave in the medical department when he was absent.

The colonel had often told him that he should have been a scout, and then added:

* Colonel H. C. Merriam, now commanding Fort Logan, near Denver, Colorado, and one of the most gallant officers in the army. THE AUTHOR.

"No, that would not have done, either; for we would have lost one of the best medical men and surgeons in our service."

"Your talents are very equally divided, Powell."

When the two frontier pards entered the quarters the colonel called out:

"Ho, Powell, so you found Cody, did you?"

"No, colonel, Cody found me, for I was captured by Indians, and Cody rescued me."

"A turn about is fair play; but do you mean it?"

"Yes, sir, for I was caught asleep, having worn myself out chasing my runaway horse."

"In the scuffle several red-skins took the trail for the happy hunting-grounds, and so I was destined for a roasting when the band reached their village."

"Bill was on his way to the fort, saw the Indians' camp-fire, and though they were ten in number he made an attack and stampeded them, rescuing me."

"We had a close call for recapture, sir, as another band came up, and we lost a captured pony and Buffalo Bill was wounded, though not seriously."

"That is all I have to report, sir, except that Cody took desperate chances to rescue me, and he deserves the greatest credit for it, Colonel Merriam."

"Yes, Cody has a way of taking desperate chances."

"But, sit down, both of you, and let me hear your report, Buffalo Bill."

"Thank you, colonel, but both of us are about used up and anxious for rest, especially as Surgeon Powell was undertaken to complete a work I left undone, and he must leave in the morning, sir, of course with your permission, Colonel Merriam."

"Well, Cody, you do look used up, so go and rest; and you, also, Surgeon Powell. I will hear your report at another time," said the colonel, quietly.

"I have only to say, sir," added Buffalo Bill, taking a paper from his pocket and glancing at it, "that I have here a map of the Valley of Death, in which I spent several days, and Surgeon Powell has promised to guide a troop there, if you, sir, see fit to order it, Colonel Merriam."

Colonel Merriam and the others gazed with amazement, first at Buffalo Bill and then at the Surgeon Scout, at his assertion that he had been in the Valley of Death.

"Do you mean, Cody, that you have dared venture upon a scout into the dread Valley of Death?" asked Colonel Merriam, with intense surprise, while the adjutant and aide-de camp were also lost in amazement at the daring of Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell meanwhile calmly surveying the scene with a look of admiration for his scouting pard.

"I have been into the Death Valley, Colonel Merriam, and here is a map I made of it for Surgeon Powell's use," was Buffalo Bill's modest response.

"Well, Cody, you have done what no other man dared do," the colonel said, impressively.

"On the contrary, Colonel Merriam, Surgeon Powell is willing to guide a troop there at once, with your authority to do so, sir."

"Is this the case, Powell?"

"It is, colonel."

"Why do you not act as guide, Buffalo Bill?" asked the colonel, mystified.

"Well, sir, I can only state that I am under a promise not to do so."

"A promise?"

"Yes, sir."

"To whom?"

"That I cannot state, sir, even to you, for it is a secret," was Buffalo Bill's rejoinder.

CHAPTER XLI.

UNDER ORDERS.

THAT Colonel Merriam was greatly amazed at the report of Buffalo Bill there was no doubt of.

In his career as a commandant of a frontier fort he had heard the weirdest, strangest stories of Death Valley.

It being beyond a desert, and with no real reason for sending a force there, he had never investigated the truth of the stories told of the valley.

It was said that it was a deadly spot for

human beings to venture into, as vapors arose from the ground that were poisonous, and others reported the waters there to be also of a poisonous nature.

Then the stories of the emigrants who had met death there either by being massacred by Indians or destroyed by the vapors arising in the valley, with the wild legends of trappers and hunters of the region being haunted, and all such nonsense, had given to Death Valley a very appropriate name and caused it to be universally shunned by all.

To learn, then, that Buffalo Bill had dared to go there, was naturally a great surprise to the officers who heard him say so.

But that he had gone not for an instant was doubted.

"Well, Cody, you have really been to the Valley of Death?" said Colonel Merriam, with surprise, after a moment of silence.

"I have, sir."

"And came back alive," and the colonel smiled.

"I am alive, sir, but it was by the merest chance that I did return."

"And you do not care to return?"

"I would be delighted to do so, colonel, but I am under a promise not to do so, and to one who is the cause of my being here now instead of lying dead in the valley."

"I made the promise, sir, for a stated time, and as I fear there will be nothing to discover if I wait until then to go there again, I have asked Surgeon Powell to take my map of the place and follow my directions, so that he can guide a troop there at once."

"Then there is reason for a troop to be sent there?"

"I think so, sir."

"You will not explain what the reason is?"

"I cannot, sir, being tied, as it were, by my promise; but if a troop is sent there I am sure that you will be satisfied with the result, and the mystery of the Death Valley will no longer be a hidden dread to all."

"All right, Cody, I shall be most happy to avail myself of Surgeon Powell's valuable services again as a scout, and he is at liberty to select the troop and scouts he cares to have accompany him."

"I thank you, Colonel Merriam, and I will ask for Colonel Wade's troop, while Cody can detail what scouts he deems best to accompany me."

"Then Captain Wade's troop goes, Powell, so now name your scouts, Cody."

"I would suggest Allen Huntington, sir, and his squad of four, for they are just the men for the work."

The adjutant wrote down the names and Buffalo Bill continued:

"Permit me also to suggest, colonel, that you send four ambulances instead of wagons, and with casks to carry water for both men and animals, with a bountiful supply of provisions, for they are to go to the best country to die of hunger and thirst in I ever saw."

The adjutant again made notes, and the colonel asked:

"Why not army wagons?"

"Because, sir, the ambulances with four mules can make double the time that the heavy wagons can."

"You are right."

"How long will the expedition last?"

"I would put it down, sir, for all of two weeks, as their stay there may be necessary for some days."

"You think a whole troop necessary?"

"I would think so, sir, and a piece of light artillery as well, for they are to come and go through an Indian country, and the fact that Surgeon Powell found red-skins so near the fort, and we discovered their trails much nearer, would indicate that they are moving and in an ugly mood."

"All right, Buffalo Bill, a full troop and a light gun will go, and with Wade in command and Surgeon Powell as guide, I already predict perfect success for the expedition."

"Adjutant, notify Captain Wade of the duty before him, and Lieutenant Fenton to go with a gun, all to be ready to start at dawn to-morrow," and after a few minutes more of conversation with Buffalo Bill upon the subject, Colonel Merriam bade the two scouting pards good-night and they retired to their quarters for much needed rest.

CHAPTER XLII.

OFF ON THE DEATH VALLEY TRAIL.

THE Surgeon Scout was well rested by his night in his own quarters, and reported on horseback to Captain Wade who had his troops ready by dawn for the start.

A gun and a dozen artillerymen under Lieutenant Fenton were also ready, and Al Huntington and his four scouts had reported for duty at an early hour.

Buffalo Bill had breakfasted with Surgeon Powell and then the two had again gone over all of the particulars which the scout had jotted down for the use of his friend.

"Remember Frank," the scout had said, "you must be sure and fill every canteen and barrel with water, when you cross the stream where the Indians had you a prisoner, for both men and horses will sadly need it."

"Approach the valley by night and camp near the pass where you are to enter, and which I have marked."

"From there you can send a force of half a dozen soldiers with a scout, to each one of the passes, and leave your ambulance and gun under a guard at the main entrance to the valley."

"When dawn comes, lead Captain Wade and his attacking force at a swift pace into the valley, following the trails I have marked, and then act as you deem best, for it is there that you will have to face the foes you find there."

"If you need aid your squads at the passes, with the gun, can easily be brought up, but I have no thought that there are over thirty-five or forty men in the valley, and Captain Wade's troop numbers seventy, not counting Lieutenant Fenton and his dozen men and Al Huntington and his four scouts."

"Yes, our force numbers ninety-three men all told, Bill, so have no fear of our being worsted if we meet double our number in the valley, or in red-skins," said the Surgeon Scout.

"I only wish I could be along, but under the pledge I made, I am ruled out."

"But luck to you, and remember, I hope for your speedy return, and that no harm will befall those whom I have spoken to you of."

"I will look out for them, Bill," and just then Captain Wade rode up and said:

"Cody, can you give me any idea of what we are to meet?"

"I believe, sir, outlaws only, but I did not discover enough to say just what you will have to encounter."

"What outlaws are doing in a land where there is no one for them to prey upon, I cannot understand," the captain said.

"Nor can I, sir."

"That is one of the mysteries of Death Valley."

"Well, Cody, you may expect a grand report of us, whether we encounter spooks, goblins—yes, all the dangers that haunt Death Valley by all accounts," said Captain Wade, with a smile and wave of the hand as he rode away to take the head of his command.

Buffalo Bill felt deepest regret that he was debarred from going, and stood by the stockade gate gazing after the command as it moved away until a voice at his side said:

"It almost breaks your heart, Cody, to see them go without you."

Turning, he beheld Colonel Merriam by his side, and saluting, he responded:

"Yes, sir, it is hard to remain behind."

"You are not really able to go, for Surgeon Powell said your wound had an ugly look this morning, and so must be looked to."

"Report yourself on sick leave, and take care of yourself."

"Thank you, sir."

"There is nothing more you care to state about your experience in Death Valley, Cody?"

The scout was silent for a moment, and then he saw that Colonel Merriam felt that there was much more that he could tell if he wished to do so.

"Yes, colonel, now that the command has gone I will tell you just what happened to me in the Valley of Death, though I must ask a favor of you in return."

"Granted, Cody."

"It is, sir, that you do not speak of it to

any one, for should this expedition fall of results, it is my intention, when the time of a pledge I made is run out, to go again to Death Valley and solve its mysteries."

"For that reason you said no more than you did?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, you can trust in me, Cody, not to speak of what you tell me," and the colonel led the way toward his own quarters to hear the scout's story.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE STORY TOLD.

WHEN Colonel Merriam reached his quarters with Buffalo Bill he said:

"Sit down, Cody, and let me hear your story, for something tells me it is an interesting one."

"I think so, colonel, and you shall be the judge."

"What put you in the idea of going there to Death Valley?"

"The many wonderful stories I have heard of the valley, sir."

"Yes, according to report, though it is a *terra incognita*, it has the name of being a Wonderland of Mystery."

"I had heard scouts, troopers, hunters and even Indians tell of the valley, sir, and there is no doubt but that several emigrant trains that pushed that far into the wilds were never heard of more; but the graves I saw there show that they met the fate it is reported they did."

"You saw graves there then?"

"Yes, sir, in one valley a number of them, and from close observation I would say that there are others there that I did not see."

"This would imply that the trains of emigrants reached the valley?"

"Yes, sir, and did not perish upon the desert as supposed."

"But died of hunger after reaching there?"

"I do not think so, colonel."

"Ah! what then?"

"In that valley, sir, is game in abundance, and of all kinds."

"There are some buffalo, elk, antelope, deer and smaller game, with wild turkeys and ducks, so they could not starve."

"But the water?"

"Is pure and of the best."

"The climate?"

"I should say was delightful, sir."

"Your opinion is, then, that those who went to the valley met a tragic end?"

"Yes, sir."

"Massacred by Indians?"

"That is the question, Colonel Merriam, but I saw no Indians there or in the vicinity."

"You saw no traces of them?"

"Not near Death Valley, sir, and I believe the Indians all avoid the valley as the abode of evil spirits."

"That means that the emigrants met their fate at the hands of others than Indians?"

"I do not assert this to be a fact, sir; but I hope that Captain Wade's expedition will give us the truth about the weird place."

"I trust so."

"The fact that there are outlaws there, sir, bothers me, when we take it into consideration that they have no one to kill and rob within days' journey of the valley."

"May it not be their retreat after having committed their lawless acts?"

"But where do they operate, sir?"

"That is the question, Cody."

"Then, sir, there is no trail to and from the valley."

"You noted this?"

"I did, sir, for I went in a semicircle on the side where it could be approached, and, excepting the trail which the emigrants must have made in going there, I saw no sign of any that had been lately traveled."

"And to the north?"

"There are mountains there through which no trail could be made, sir."

"The more you say of this Death Valley, Cody, the more you mystify me."

"You are right, sir, for the more mystified I am."

"You are sure there are dwellers there?"

"I am, sir."

"You saw them?"

"I was their prisoner, sir."

"Outlaws?"
 "Yes, sir."
 "How did you know this?"
 "From what I saw, heard and imagined, sir."

"I was very careful to study all that I could, and you shall be the judge, Colonel Merriam, when you hear what happened to me, if the stories about Death Valley have not considerable truth for their foundation."

"I saw enough to mystify me, yet I determined to learn more, but being hedged in by my pledge, I was forced to ask Surgeon Powell to go there as guide."

"If he fails to find out what the mystery is, with the aid of Captain Wade and his men, then I will await my limit and go with Doctor Powell and discover all there is to know in Death Valley, for I believe we two can do much together and I only wish I had had him with me when I went there."

"Now, sir, I'll tell you all that happened."

And Buffalo Bill made known to Colonel Merriam his strange experience in the Valley of Death.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE MISSING OFFICER.

It was with the deepest interest that Buffalo Bill's story of his scouting in the Valley of Death was listened to by Colonel Merriam.

The scout told his adventure then in a modest way natural to him, and the colonel felt that every word he uttered was perfectly true.

At last he said:

"Cody, I am more mystified than you are, about those strange happenings in a valley we all deemed uninhabited."

"I am very glad that Surgeon Powell has gone to guide Captain Wade there, and trust good may come of it, for we must know who those dwellers there are."

"Yes, sir, and I believe the surgeon and Captain Wade will find out."

"You cannot guess who the man was whom you befriended?"

"No, sir, though I did feel that somewhere I had seen him before."

"He was an educated man?"

"Yes, sir."

"And would not state why he had been hanged?"

"No, sir, he gave no reasons."

"But mysteriously disappeared when you left him in the canyon?"

"Yes, sir."

"Taken away by his old foes, I suppose?"

"No, sir, it did not strike me that he had been."

"Then he was not paralyzed as you supposed?"

"He was suffering, sir, I am sure; but if he left the canyon of his own accord he got better very soon after my departure, or he was feigning to be much worse than he was in order to give me the slip."

"But where could he go?"

"I do not know."

"He had no weapons and no provisions?"

"He had the revolver I left with him, and the food."

"It is remarkable indeed."

"But, Cody?"

"Yes, sir."

"Let me tell you a story of an affair that happened some time ago, and which comes back to me now merely from the fact that you speak of the fate of the wagon-trains that penetrated to the Death Valley."

"Yes, colonel, I shall be glad to hear the story."

"You say that this outlaw chief was a gentlemanly fellow?"

"Yes, sir, a man of striking appearance, splendidly formed, with a courtly manner, yet a villain throughout I felt certain."

"There was another known as Talbot, you say?"

"They called him Captain Talbot, sir, and he was a lieutenant to the chief, I take it."

"Well, I wish to tell you that which you may have heard of, about Paymaster Talbot Turpin."

"I have heard that a paymaster by that

name, sir, was held up by road-agents, killed and robbed of a large sum of Government money, when he was on his way to pay the troops."

"Well, Cody, the truth is, Paymaster Talbot Turpin was not killed."

"Not killed, sir?" asked the scout, with surprise.

"No."

"It is so believed, sir."

"By all but a few, yes."

"He was robbed by road-agents, it was said, of forty thousand dollars."

"No, he was not robbed, the few who know say, but he robbed himself."

"Robbed himself, sir?"

"The story is, Buffalo Bill, that he was out in his accounts a thousand or two, and arranged a plot by which he would be held up and robbed on the way."

"Yes, sir."

"He hired three men to do the holding up, and he was to have it pass off without bloodshed."

"But they killed the driver and a guard, and then demanded that he turn over the whole of the money to them, or they would inform on him at headquarters."

"In despair he at once went with them, sharing the money he had belonging to the Government, and it was reported that he also was killed, and his body, with the others, thrown into the river."

"Such is the story, Buffalo Bill, though I never believed that Turpin had gone wrong; but now it is known, as I said, by a very few, that he was recognized as one of a band of road-agents—in fact was their chief—and his field of operations was down on the Overland Trails, so when you spoke of the man who captured you in Death Valley being called Captain Talbot, I at once connected him with the fugitive paymaster."

"It may be, sir."

"Talbot was the paymaster's Christian name, and his rank was that of captain."

"What kind of a looking man was he, sir?"

The colonel described him, and Buffalo Bill said earnestly:

"That outlaw Talbot, colonel, is the missing paymaster, then."

CHAPTER XLV.

WAITING.

COLONEL MERRIAM was seemingly greatly distressed at the belief that the paymaster was really the outlaw whom Buffalo Bill knew as "Captain Talbot."

He had never allowed himself to believe in the guilt of the officer, feeling sure that he had really been killed and robbed, and that the rumor of his joining the road-agents had been false.

How that story had originated no one seemed to know.

It had been told among the military camps that Paymaster Turpin was short of his accounts.

Then, from the same mysterious source had sprung the story of the holding up of the coach and the killing of Turpin, the driver and the guard.

This had been followed by the report that a soldier had seen Paymaster Turpin, and a scout who had been taken prisoner by road-agents had said that Captain Turpin was the chief of the outlaws.

He had told his outlaw guard that he recognized the paymaster in the chief, and he had said that Captain Turpin had joined the road-agents and had shared the Government money with the band.

This story could never be traced, but still it was believed by many, and thus the dishonor was written against the paymaster's name.

When the scout told Colonel Merriam that the description of "Captain Talbot," the outlaw officer, was strangely like that of the paymaster, Talbot Turpin, and the similarity of names was taken into consideration, Colonel Merriam felt that the rumor of the officer's dishonor could no longer be doubted, and it was a blow to him, for he had greatly admired the young captain and hoped for a bright future for him, as his friend was only acting temporarily in the pay department, but was really a captain of cavalry.

"I hope it may not prove to be your friend, colonel, for it would be better that he really had been killed, than to be shown so dishonorable," Buffalo Bill said, when he saw how the colonel felt over the affair.

"By far, Cody, by far had he better have been killed than so dishonored."

"But we will know upon the return of Wade and his party, as they will doubtless bring in all of these mysterious dwellers in the Valley of Death."

"Yes, sir; but I still cannot understand why Captain Talbot, if the paymaster, as a road-agent can be hiding in the Death Valley."

"Nor can I, and from your account they are a cruel, merciless lot of villains."

"They certainly are, sir," answered Buffalo Bill, and soon after he went to his quarters, deeply impressed with what he had heard.

He recalled Talbot, the outlaw, as well as he could, and felt sure that he was a wretch without mercy, and as cruel as a panther.

He recalled the masked chief, the men who had captured him, and those who had been met, though not seen by him on account of his having been blindfolded.

The beautiful face of the young girl he remembered with pleasure, and her being in the midst of a band of outlaws and having influence over them, but added the more to the complication of all happenings in the Death Valley.

Who had been the one that had allowed him to be set free upon the supposed taking of the oath the girl, not the scout, had repeated after him?

He could not imagine who that man was, and there was the man whom he had rescued from dying at the end of the rope who was a greater mystery than all.

The more Buffalo Bill pondered over matters the more anxious he was to learn the result of Captain Wade's expedition, and he longed to have the party return.

He feared that in some way harm might befall the young girl in the outlaw camp, and the man who had also befriended him, though he trusted to Surgeon Powell to look after them.

"Well, I shall be anxious until the return of the party, and then, if they have not solved the mystery, why Frank Powell and myself must do so," muttered the scout.

And with this decision Buffalo Bill was compelled to rest content.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE SEARCH.

THE expedition to Death Valley was led by the Surgeon Scout, unerringly, and by rapid marches until the desert lands were reached, and then a halt was made for a night and part of a day for rest and to prepare for the long and arduous pull across the treeless, waterless plains.

The water casks were filled at the last moment before starting, along with the canteens, the horses were allowed to drink their fill and the march was taken up across the arid, hot and parched desert.

At night, as at noon, it would have been a dry camp, and fireless, but for the water brought along and the wood for camp fires.

As it was, wood and water were used sparingly, but there was no murmur among the gallant soldiers, and the start the next morning was made bright and early and with a will, though all realized what a hard day they had before them.

The noonday camp was not made as usual, the Surgeon Scout thinking it best to push on until late in the afternoon when they would have to camp until nightfall and then make a rapid ride to Death Valley for a night encampment, for then they would find grass, wood and water, and early the next morning could sweep rapidly through the dreaded and fatal vale that had been so shunned by all.

When the first shadows of night began to fall, Surgeon Powell, with Al Huntington and his scouts, started for the valley, the command to follow at a slower pace.

Warned by all that Buffalo Bill had told him, and following the scout's directions to the letter, Surgeon Powell went straight to-

ward the pass which was the main entrance into Death Valley.

It was the one which Buffalo Bill had entered by, and where at that time there had been no guard stationed.

When they neared the ascent of the hill the Surgeon Scout dismounted with Allen Huntington, and the two went forward on foot, leaving the scouts to follow some distance behind with their horses.

They crept up the hill without the slightest sound and at last reached the pass.

Their desire was to come upon the camp of the outlaw guards and surprise and capture them.

But they reached the pass and saw no one.

They made a search about the trail through the cliffs, but found not a sign of a guard.

Then the five scouts came up with the horses and the search was made a most thorough one, but without any discovery.

"They have withdrawn their guards, that is certain," said the surgeon.

"Yes, doctor, they has, for there hain't none here, nor near here, either," was Al Huntington's response.

Frank Powell then sent a man back to bring on the command while he went with Al Huntington down into the valley to find a camping-place, the other scouts waiting at the pass.

A half mile down the valley a splendid camp-ground was found upon the banks of a stream where there was wood in plenty, the clearest of water and a meadow of juicy grass.

A fire was not built, however, as the searchers wished to keep as quiet as possible, but, the command coming up, the horses were turned loose and surrounded by a guard to prevent straying, while the thirsty men and animals reveled in the drinks of pure water from the stream.

Then the animals ran for the meadow and were soon cropping the long grass that grew there in abundance.

The men ate a cold supper, blankets were spread, and, the sentinels being posted, all the rest lay down to get the rest they greatly needed.

There was considerable anxiety shown by the men at their being in the Valley of Death, and a superstitious dread filled the heart of many of the soldiers, after all the stories they had heard of the place.

But the morning dawned brightly, the sun peered over the mountain-tops, and a scene of rare beauty met every eye.

It was like a beautiful mirage, so common in that country, with the ranges of mountains, the lovely valley, trees, green grass, flowing streams, and all around a most tempting scene.

But a cold breakfast was eaten, as they did not wish to betray their presence by the smoke of a fire, and then the search was begun for the mysterious dwellers in Death Valley.

CHAPTER XLVII.

IN VAIN.

FRANK POWELL recalled that Buffalo Bill had been blindfolded after being made a prisoner by the outlaws, so he could only guess at localities and directions he had gone over under the guidance of his foes.

His map was thorough, as far as it went, and the Surgeon Scout recognized its bearings as he glanced about him in the valley.

"This is the very spot where Buffalo Bill found that man hanging," he said, consulting his map and directions.

The command had been refreshed and rested by their halt in the valley after the long and severe pull across the desert, and so all were ready for the start.

Captain Wade consulted with Surgeon Powell and Lieutenant Fenton, and it was decided that their officer guide should go some distance on ahead, accompanied by the scouts, and the two cavalry lieutenants of the troop should have squads of flankers, keeping along with the command on either side.

The main force, under Captain Wade, with the artillery and ambulances, should keep in the center of the valley, ready for service when needed at any point.

So the start was made, and with ample

time ahead, Surgeon Powell, following the map trails, went to the canyon where was the old burying-ground, and which had been the camping-place of Buffalo Bill and the unknown whom he had rescued from hanging.

A short search was made and the two camp-fires seen, then the graves, but nothing else.

Pushing on ahead, the scouts moved along the valley slowly, examining the canyons, vales, and timber as they marched, but without seeing anything that looked suspicious.

Game in plenty was seen, and the men were greatly tempted to kill some, but were prevented by the stern discipline ruling over all.

The cliff where Buffalo Bill had been in ambush, and where he had captured Talbot, was passed, and beyond was the hill which the Girl Guide had climbed to the bridge.

Up the hill went the Surgeon Scout, but there was the unspanned chasm, for the bridge had gone.

His well-trained eye saw traces of human presence there in the past, but that was all, for no one was visible anywhere.

Back to the valley he went again, and the corral was before him, or rather where the corral had been, for the snake fence had been removed, and the spot looked only like the assembling-place of buffalo or deer.

It was noon now, but the command would not halt.

They must push on and see what was to be found in the valley.

The truthfulness of Buffalo Bill's map was constantly revealed, though the removal of the corral, which he had marked as made of poles and a few acres in size, was a surprise to the Surgeon Scout.

"But for Bill's map we might have gone thus far and never suspected that there was other than game in this valley," said Frank Powell, to Captain Wade.

"That is so, Powell."

"What does it mean?" asked the captain.

"It means that those who dwell here have expected visitors and prepared for it, by trying to have the valley appear uninhabited."

"Well, if there are any people in the valley we must find them."

"We must, sir," was Frank Powell's firm rejoinder.

So on they pushed once more until the valley spread off into half a dozen smaller and pretty parks, or vales.

There were hills, heavy timber lands, crystal streams, cataracts falling over rocky crags and everywhere scenes of beauty.

The command went into camp here, and up each one of the five little valleys a squad of cavalry was dispatched.

It was night when they returned, and not one of the officers in charge could report making any discovery.

In a lonely camping-place the command passed the night, and early the next morning the force was divided and again invaded the small valleys.

But with the night they returned to make the same report:

"There is not a human being or sign of habitation in the valley."

But unwilling to give up, Surgeon Powell urged Captain Wade to remain until every inch of the valley could be explored, if it took a month to do the work.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

WHERE DUTY CALLED.

"WELL, Cody, what do you think of the long stay of Wade's command?"

So asked Colonel Merriam one morning when the third week was going by and no tidings had come in of the party sent out under the guidance of Frank Powell to reach the Valley of Death.

"Candidly, Colonel Merriam, I am becoming anxious about them," was the scout's reply.

"Then I had better send a force out to look them up?"

"No, colonel, not yet, for the trip is a long and dangerous one, and they may have been detained in the valley from various reasons."

"Then, too, Captain Wade is a most able

commander and you know what Surgeon Powell is, while the force is too large to be overwhelmed by Indians."

"I think you are right, Cody, yet I am anxious at their overstay of time."

"If they do not come in by to-morrow, sir, I will take their trail."

"Are you able to do so, for you have had a hard time with your wound?"

"Oh, yes, sir, it is not painful now and I am all right."

"Well, you can go, if they do not send us some word by to-morrow night."

"Thank you, sir."

"And if you do not put in an appearance in a few days I shall march at the head of my whole command to Death Valley," the colonel said.

"I will hardly dare go into the valley, after my promise, unless I am sure, sir, that Captain Wade has captured dwellers there; but I can find out enough to relieve your anxiety."

"Yes, for I am really anxious, and you see how the men and people at the fort feel, for they are as superstitious as they can be about the mysterious spot."

"Yes, sir, in spite of the advance of enlightenment people will still be governed by superstition."

"It is the fault of our early training, Cody, for we were taught too much about myths and too little regarding the realities of life."

The time passed away and no word came from the missing command, so Buffalo Bill reported to Colonel Merriam the next night for orders to start upon the trail the following morning.

The scout's wound had been more serious than at first believed, and he had been so weakened by loss of blood that he had quite a siege of it in the hospital.

But he had rallied and was quickly gaining his former strength.

"Well, Cody, I suppose you must go?" said Colonel Merriam when the scout made his appearance at headquarters.

"I have made all arrangements to do so, sir."

"You will take some one with you of course?"

"No, sir, I prefer to go alone."

"I fear you are not yet quite equal to it."

"Oh, yes, sir, I am as good as ever again, and I would prefer to go alone, for you know the command will be found at the other end of my trail."

"Yes, and I only hope you will find them all right."

"I do not fear otherwise, sir."

"Well, should they come back by a different trail than the one they went, I will send a scout to recall you."

"Thank you, sir."

"You start at dawn?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then good-by, and good luck to you," and the colonel extended his hand, which the gallant scout warmly grasped, for he had a warm regard and admiration for his commandant.

Going to his quarters Buffalo Bill made the most careful preparations for his trip.

He had discovered just what the desert was, and was going to prepare accordingly.

That he was anxious about the command's safety was certain, though he had not shown as much to Colonel Merriam, while in reality he was hardly able to stand the hardships of the trail in spite of his assertion to the contrary.

But Buffalo Bill was not the man to think of himself where duty or friendship was concerned, and he had made up his mind to find Captain Wade's command, if he had to go again into Death Valley.

His promise he would break when he knew that the lives of his comrades might depend upon his actions alone.

So resolving, Buffalo Bill rode out of the fort at daybreak, once more on the trail that led to the Valley of Death.

CHAPTER XLIX.

SEEN AT LONG RANGE.

BUFFALO BILL had prepared for his trail by taking with him a pack-horse.

The animal was as good as the one he rode, and carried his blankets, provisions,

and two small water-casks, a bag of grain, with ammunition and all else that he could take off of the weight of his riding horse.

"We won't starve, and I guess we will have a drink or two of water in crossing the desert, old fellows," said the scout to his horses, who seemed to understand that he was looking after their comfort as well as his own.

The scout struck at once into the trail of the Wade command and pushed along at a steady gait that would carry him many miles between sunrise and sunset.

He had not filled his casks and canteens, as there would be no need of carrying the extra weight through the part of the country where there were streams.

When he came to the last stream before entering the desert land he would fill casks and canteens.

He had put behind him fifty miles when he camped for the night, and he knew at the rate he was traveling the next afternoon would bring him into the desert country.

His camp was a safe one, and with good water and grass at hand he built his fire and enjoyed his supper.

He was very tired, being still weakened by his wound, and soon sunk to sleep.

He was awakened by a low snort of his horse, and it was just dawn.

Quickly he was on his feet, and to his ears came the sound of muffled tread.

Was it a herd of buffaloes upon the move?

Was it the command returning and marching by night?

Was it a band of red-skins on the war-path?

These questions he could not answer until able to see down into the valley half a mile away, for he was encamped upon a hill.

He stepped quickly to where his horses were staked out and bridled and saddled them, got his traps together and was ready to move.

Then the dawn grew brighter and he saw what had caused the sound.

Far away in the distance was the stream which the military command had crossed in going to Death Valley, and where it must recross or go far out of its way in returning.

The ford was a narrow one, there were high hills upon this side of the stream, and the desert region beyond.

There was heavy timber upon this side, and the stream was wide and a couple of feet deep.

It was the very spot for an ambush and toward it was marching a long file of horsemen. They were Indian braves, and the line was stretched out for miles.

The line curved around the hill, then extended back over the prairie and the end of it was far up the stream.

The horses of the Indians moved along as though they were jaded by a hard ride.

Buffalo Bill was amazed and he carefully took in the situation, while he ran his eyes rapidly over the numbers.

"They are on the war-path and there are half a thousand of them if there is one."

"Yes, I think I understand their game."

"They have discovered Captain Wade's command upon the return march and they have flanked miles around to get ahead of him and lie in ambush at yonder ford."

"Of course, even Powell will not expect a band of red-skins between them and the fort, and they will run right into the trap."

"Caught thus, and with such a force against them, of five to one, the soldiers may get into a panic and the result will be a massacre."

"Yes, they are making straight for the ford, and they will camp there, sending their ponies down the stream out of sight."

"This looks very, very serious, and I hardly see how I can be of much service from my present position."

"Let me think."

The scout sat down and began to think, his face very stern, and with an anxious look in his eyes.

He was safe himself, even if some curious red-skin took a notion to climb the hill, for he could seek safety in flight.

But the fate that might befall his comrades troubled him greatly.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet and from his lips came the words:

"I will do it!"

CHAPTER L.

THE DUMB MESSENGER.

IN the few moments which he had devoted to thinking what he could do, to save the command of Captain Wade from falling into the ambush, Buffalo Bill had hit upon a plan.

He took out a pencil and piece of paper and wrote as follows:

"COLONEL MERRIAM:—

"SIR:—I have to report that I made Blue Top Range the first day out, and awakened by my horse at daybreak this morning, I saw a band of mounted warriors upon the march.

Their horses were jaded, and they were stretched out in Indian file for several miles, their line forming the half of a circle as they moved toward Last Crossing.

The scouts at the fort will explain to you that this Last Crossing is the very place for an ambush from this side, and a party coming from the other.

As I write they are dismounting and their ponies are being sent down the stream to a hiding-place, the dismounting braves remaining in camp at the ford.

This can only mean an attack upon Captain Wade whose return they are aware of and therefore wait to ambush him.

If the command have seen the Indians they may be on their guard, though the chances are that they will not expect to find foes between them and the fort.

I send this by my faithful horse scout, and I know he will go with all speed to the fort, and I would suggest that you send a couple of troops of cavalry by a forced march to this point to hem the red-skins in, while I shall start at once to flank the ford, cross the stream at some trail above and thus reach Captain Wade and warn him.

I will ask him to delay until your force has time to get here, and then to approach the ford as though unsuspecting danger, and open with his piece of artillery, following with a charge, thus surprising where the Indians expect to surprise him.

We can thus drive them in a panic, and if your force comes up in the rear a severe lesson can be given them.

I will seek to delay the command so as to cross the ford to-morrow, and if my dumb messenger gets to the fort early, the cavalry can reach this spot before daybreak.

With respect,
"BUFFALO BILL.
"Chief of Scouts."

This note was fastened securely to the bridle of the pack-horse, and the reins fastened up so that he could not get his head down to eat grass on the way.

He was allowed to carry nothing else, so that he could make good time.

The pack-saddle was then *cached*, with all extra weight that Buffalo Bill could relieve his own horse of, and then the scout started down the hill to the valley.

At the stream there the two horses were watered, the rein of the dumb messenger was tied to the circingle to keep his head up, and after being led to the trail by which they had come the scout said:

"Now, Scout, do your duty, for much depends upon you."

"That is your way and you are to get there in good time."

"To the fort, sir!"

"Go!"

The intelligent animal appeared to understand what was said, glanced at his master, looked about him, hesitated a moment and trotted away.

"Go, sir, go!"

At the command he started off at a gallop and as far as the scout could see him he was keeping up the pace, steadily following the trail back to the fort.

"Now it is your time, Banjo, and you have even harder work to do," said Buffalo Bill, and he threw himself into the saddle and started off at a gallop.

The hills hid him from the view of the red-skins, and he kept along until at last he struck the trail made by the braves on the march.

They had all passed, but the scout was ready for a surprise, should any occur.

It was a ride of ten miles to the spot where he reached the ford, and an ugly one it was.

But he urged his horse down the steep path into the river, crossed to the other side, and then rubbed the animal dry, which also gave him a rest after his hard gallop.

Knowing that he was out of sight of the Indians on the hills at the ford, the scout struck off across the barren plain as straight as a bird flies.

If he was fortunate he would head the command off before they got within twenty miles of the ford, but to do this he might have to ride thirty miles in a lope.

But his horse was nothing to him if he

could gain his object and the animal was pushed along at a swift and steady gait.

Hour after hour passed, and, excepting short rests now and then, the horse was kept steadily on.

The water in his canteens Buffalo Bill gave to his horse from time to time, though he knew it would leave him upon the desert without any.

If his horse failed him, it would leave him alone upon the desert, on foot and without food or water.

But this did not trouble the brave scout, so long as his comrades might be saved by self-sacrifice upon his part.

CHAPTER LI.

IN TIME.

NOON came and passed, but there was no noonday halt, nor food for the scout or his horse.

Afar off on his right were the mountains, and this side of him was a low range of hills, marking the other shore of the river.

There, at a gap in the hills, the scout knew there were half a thousand red-skins lying in ambush.

Far ahead rose the blue range that marked the environs of the Death Valley.

Before him, mile after mile, stretched the rugged, barren desert, and his eyes were riveted upon a dark mass visible a couple of leagues away.

"It is the command."

"They have halted to noon," said Buffalo Bill, and a smile of grim satisfaction crossed his face.

He was glad to feel that he had found them, and more to know that no harm had thus far befallen them.

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when the whole command saw the scout coming.

"It is Buffalo Bill," cried Surgeon Frank Powell, and every eye was riveted upon him, as his panting horse drew nearer and nearer.

"They have had no great trouble, for I see the gun and the ambulances," muttered Buffalo Bill as he drew nearer.

"But I see no prisoners," he added a moment after.

"Come, old horse, you have done your work well, so need drive yourself no more," and a moment after he drew rein before Captain Wade and Surgeon Powell who had ridden forward to meet him.

"Ho, Cody, glad to see you."

"Anything wrong at the fort?" asked Captain Wade.

"No, sir, but Colonel Merriam was anxious at your long delay, so I came out to look you up."

"We are all right, but we have not seen a human being out of our own command, since we left the fort."

"You have not, sir?" asked Buffalo Bill with surprise.

"Not one."

"Not even an Indian, sir?"

"No."

"Then there is a chance for you to see five hundred of them to-morrow, sir."

"Ah! where are they?"

"Lying in ambush, sir, at Last Crossing Ford."

"By Jupiter, but this is news, and we are in luck to be headed off by you, Cody."

"I discovered them at daylight, sir, by my horse awakening me, and the force is five hundred, if not more."

"They have seen you without doubt, for they had ridden hard through the night to get to the ford and head you off."

"And you came to warn us?"

"I sent a note to Colonel Merriam—"

"How?"

"By my pack-horse, sir."

"Will he go to the fort?"

"Straight, sir, and I believe is already there."

"Was it Scout, Bill?"

"Yes, Surgeon Powell."

"Then he is as sure as death."

"Colonel Merriam will get the note," was the confident reply of the Surgeon Scout.

"I told the colonel I was going to warn you, and suggested that he send a couple of troops of cavalry to Blue Top to get in the rear of the ambushed Indians so as to hem them in, and if they ride rapidly they can be in position before daybreak to-morrow."

"You are every inch a soldier, Bill, and ought to be a commander."

"Thank you, Captain Wade."

"But I saw the chances of hemming the Indians in, as you, who knew they were in ambush, could pretend not to do so, approach the river, and open with your gun, following with a charge."

"Their horses are over a mile away, they will be stampeded and run for their ponies, and you can cross, while if a force comes up from the fort you have them between two fires."

"You suggested this to Colonel Merriam, Bill?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good!"

"Then the red-skins will be surprised instead of ourselves, though we owe our safety to you."

"Yes, they would have wiped us out if they are that strong."

"You are always the right man in the right place, Bill," added Surgeon Powell.

Then he added:

"But you look really ill."

"I have been in the hospital for two weeks with that wound, doctor."

"That is bad; but you can rest now."

"Then we had better go slow, Bill, in approaching the ford."

"Yes, captain, camp on the plain in sight of the red-skins, as though your horses were broken down and you could get no further."

"You can camp ten miles from the ford and move slowly on after midnight to get there early in the morning," advised the scout.

CHAPTER LII.

TRUE AS STEEL.

COLONEL MERRIAM was more anxious than he cared to admit about the long stay of the party sent to the Valley of Death.

He could not understand why they should remain longer than a couple of weeks at furthest.

And now he was anxious to have Buffalo Bill go alone on the scout to look the missing party up.

The next day, as his fears increased, he decided that he would send a force out to look after both Buffalo Bill and the command of Captain Wade.

He would send a cavalry officer and a dozen men.

He had given the order to the officer he intended to send, to prepare to depart in the afternoon, and they were about to ride out of the stockade, when the sentinel on the lookout reported a horseman coming far off on the plain.

Soon after he said that it was a horse without a rider, and it was but a short while before all eyes were turned upon an animal coming at a long, sweeping gallop directly toward the fort.

As he came nearer it was seen that he had a bridle on, and that the reins were tied to a circingle.

Then it could be seen that he was dripping with sweat and halting at the stockade gate he was panting like a hard run hound.

"A letter pinned to his bridle," said a soldier, handing the paper to Colonel Merriam who had come to the scene.

The horse was recognized as belonging to Buffalo Bill and a cheer greeted the faithful animal, who had been true as steel to the work that had been put upon him to accomplish.

"Lead that horse away and give him every attention," ordered Colonel Merriam, and he walked toward his quarters the letter in his hand.

"This is dated at five o'clock this morning, and it is now half-past twelve and Cody started him fifty miles from here."

"Bravo, good horse," said Colonel Merriam and a few moments after, having read the letter he gave orders for two troops of cavalry to start at once in light marching order for Blue Top Range.

"I wish you to press on with all speed, Captain Cunningham and reach the Blue Top Range by midnight if possible."

"This will give you time for your scouts to acquaint you with the position, the hiding-place of the red-skins, and how you can head them off if they retreat."

"It will also give you a few hours' rest

for your men and horses before going into the fight, but spare neither man or beast in getting there."

"I will read you Cody's letter, so that you will fully understand the situation, and I will send a reserve force to follow you rapidly, with provisions, camp outfit, yes, and a couple of guns, so you need carry nothing more than absolutely necessary."

Captain Cunningham listened attentively, heard Buffalo Bill's letter read and said:

"I will get there in time, Colonel Merriam, if man and horse can do it."

"But will you give me half a dozen of Cody's scouts?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Pick your men."

"And about what force will the reserve be, sir, so I may know what to depend upon should we meet a larger number than we expect the red-skins to be?"

"Your force will be a hundred strong, and I'll send a troop and two guns to support you."

"Thank you, sir, for with these, and what Wade has, we should be able to whip a very large body of red-skins."

"I am ready to start, sir, for my men are mounting I see."

"Then push ahead, Cunningham, and good fortune attend you."

Captain Cunningham went briskly out to where his troops had halted, mounted, and amid the cheers of the garrison the gallant Boys in Blue dashed out of the fort to the relief of their endangered comrades in arms.

Colonel Merriam watched their departure and then walked down to the stables to see how the Dumb Messenger was getting along.

"He made a hard run of it, sir, but you see he's all right," said the man who had taken Scout in charge.

"I am glad to hear it, Ben, for I would not have him go under for ten times his value," and patting the horse affectionately the colonel returned to his quarters, saying to himself:

"Cunningham will make the fifty miles by midnight, though he has just ten hours to do it in."

Two hours after, the reserve force, with supplies, moved out of the fort, the commanding officers having orders to travel at a fair speed and push on through the night to get to Blue Top Range early the next morning.

CHAPTER LIII.

A FRONTIER FIGHT.

THE command of Captain Cunningham pushed on bravely.

Night came on and a horse dropped out dead beat.

His rider remained with him.

Then a soldier gave out utterly and was left with a comrade on the trail.

The pace was a killing one for man and beast, and when the Blue Top Range loomed up ahead and near at hand, a dozen men and horses were strewn along the trail they had come over to await the coming up of the reserve force.

But the determined commander never swerved in his purpose to reach the rescue point on time, and if he left behind him half of his force he would carry out his orders.

Larger and blacker loomed up the range ahead, and just at midnight the worn horses and weary men were halted in the gap where they could be hidden until needed on the top of the hill where they could command a view of the scene of ambush the moment the daylight would permit them to do so.

The position they reached was not far from Buffalo Bill's camp of the night before, and they gladly sought what rest they could get before daybreak, the captain alone remaining awake and on watch.

It was just as the first glimmer of light came that Captain Cunningham aroused the scouts, the horses were saddled, and every eye was strained to peer across the undulating land to the river.

The water was soon seen in the distance, and yet not the sign of a red-skin was visible upon the hills about the ford.

They were too wary to move out of cover, if still there, until their prey got into their net.

"There they come," said Captain Cunningham, who had his field-glasses to his eyes.

He referred to the command of Captain Wade, which was seen across the stream coming over the plain to the ford.

They were a couple of miles yet from the ford, and apparently unconscious of any danger threatening them there.

"Now, men, we will join our fighters," said Captain Cunningham to the scouts, and they led their horses down the hill to where the troopers were in waiting.

Breakfast, a cold one without coffee, for they dared not build a fire, was ready, and the few hours' rest had refreshed both men and horses.

As soon as they had taken their breakfast the troopers mounted and rode into position, just as one of the scouts who had remained longer on the hill came down and reported that Captain Wade was almost up to the ford, while afar off, coming to their aid, was the reserve force.

This cheering news at once had its effect upon the men and they were anxious to commence the battle.

Leading his men to a position where, to go further would expose them to view, Captain Cunningham waited for the first signal of battle.

That, if Buffalo Bill had reached Captain Wade, he knew would be a shot from the piece of artillery, and which would surely startle the Indians.

They had not long to wait, though it seemed so to all, before there broke upon the still morning air the deep howl of the six-pounder, returned almost immediately by the bursting of the shell in the hills on their side of the river.

Then came the rattle of small-arms, cheers, wild yells, and the red-skins were seen by the hundreds rushing out of their places of hiding and running down the river toward their horses, for a form behind them had shown the two troops under Captain Cunningham charging down the stream, the gun meanwhile sending bursting shells into the midst of the savages who were certainly terribly surprised and in a perfect stampede for their ponies.

Up out of the ford came Captain Wade and his men, and Buffalo Bill was seen to be in the front with Surgeon Powell, while from the other direction came the troopers under the gallant Cunningham, thus catching the Indians in close quarters.

Lieutenant Fenton got his gun across the river almost as soon as the troopers, and at once began to throw shells into the timber where the Indian ponies were in hiding.

The result was a panic for savage and beast, and, as the Indians fled in wild haste toward the upper ford, suddenly the reserve came into view and headed them off, so that it became a rapid, running frontier flight, fright and fight on the part of the red-skins.

CHAPTER LIV.

THE RETURN OF THE VICTORS.

SEIZED with a panic in spite of their numbers, half of them unable to catch their frightened ponies, which the shells stampeded, hemmed in and with three forces to look after, fight and fly from, the Indians were in a condition bordering on despair.

Their hope of triumph had turned into defeat, and they fled in all directions, leaving their outfit and all.

Some were mounted and charged together toward safety in a retreat, others were flying at random hither and thither, though they were on their horses, and still more were afoot and seeking hiding-places in the hills and timber, a few dashing into the river to gain safety on the other shore.

The roar of the guns, for the reserve had come up, the rattle of the carbines and revolvers, with the wild yells of the scouts and cheers of the troopers, were enough to demoralize a much larger Indian army than the one then fighting for their lives.

As well as they could the tired horses of the troopers kept up the chase, but not wishing to break his men utterly down, and their animals, too, Captain Wade, the ranking officer, had the recall sounded, and the three commands went into camp on the river-bank,

a few men only being sent to keep up the chase for a short while.

"Those same Indians will never all get together again in a lifetime," said Buffalo Bill as he returned from the chase among the very last of the pursuers.

Surgeon Powell had just come in also and replied:

"Some were killed, others drowned and I believe many ran themselves to death."

"We owe the victory to you, Cody," Captain Cunningham said.

"Yes, and our little army would have been as bad off as are the Indians, Cody, had you not headed us off from riding into that ambush," and Captain Wade spoke with an earnestness which showed that he fully appreciated the services rendered.

"Three cheers for Buffalo Bill," sung out Lieutenant Fenton and they were given with a will, the handsome scout raising his sombrero in response.

The dead Indians, and there were quite a number of them, were gathered up and buried, and Surgeon Powell looked after the few who were wounded, after he had cared for the soldiers.

There were several soldiers only killed and less than a score wounded, so that the command had fared well.

A camp was made for the wounded Indians, and a few who had been captured were placed in charge of their wounded comrades and ponies given them to make their way to their village when able to do so.

The command camped on the river until the following morning and then pulled out for the fort, only a couple of scouting parties being sent to keep an eye upon the Indians and see if there were any other bands in the vicinity.

Another night camp was made before reaching the fort, for the distance was too great to push over unless there was reason for doing so.

The next afternoon when the sun was nearing the horizon the command came in sight of the fort, and as they drew nearer the garrison were delighted to see that the three parties had been united.

All in the garrison turned out to greet the victors, and cheer after cheer rung out as they marched into the fort, the band playing them a welcome.

Colonel Merriam was also out to receive them, and his quick glance at the column showed him the well-known forms of Captain Wade, Surgeon Powell, Lieutenant Fenton and Buffalo Bill, and he gave a sigh of relief to see that none of these four had fallen.

As soon as he could do so, Captain Wade, accompanied by Captain Cunningham and the officer who had commanded the reserve, went to headquarters to report to Colonel Merriam, and the story of the expedition was told.

When they had been complimented upon their good work by Colonel Merriam, they took their leave, and an orderly was dispatched at once to request Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill to report at headquarters.

CHAPTER LV.

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE.

WHEN Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill arrived at headquarters, they were greeted cordially by Colonel Merriam, whom they found alive.

"Welcome back, Powell, and you, too, Cody, and let me say that I sent for you to express to you both my high appreciation of the services you have rendered."

The surgeon and the scout bowed in graceful acknowledgment of the complimentary language of Colonel Merriam, who then went on to say:

"Cody, your good horse brought the message to me in wonderful time, and he is none the worse for his hard run, either, for I went to see him this afternoon."

"I have also seen him, colonel, and he is all right I am glad to say."

"And Cody made a wonderful ride on his other horse, colonel, to head us off and give us warning of the Indians being in ambush at the ford," said Surgeon Frank Powell.

"Captain Wade has told me of it, and you shall have full credit in my official report, Cody, for you deserve the brightest praise, I assure you."

The scout's face flushed, but he bowed, making no reply.

"Now, Surgeon Powell, I have heard from Captain Wade of your expedition to the Valley of Death, and how much he owes to you for your services as guide and adviser."

"Captain Wade is very kind, sir."

"I am sorry I was not able to do really some service, for our expedition was, I may say, a fruitless one."

"Have you told Cody?"

"No, sir, no more than that we were unsuccessful."

"We were to talk it over to-night, sir."

"Then let me hear your report, Surgeon Powell, that I may know the full situation, having heard Wade's."

"Certainly, Colonel Merriam."

"Begin at your entrance to the Death Valley, please."

"Well, colonel, in advancing upon the valley we were expecting to run upon a guard and prepared to do so."

"But we saw no one and so continued down into the valley and camped."

"We saw that Cody had drawn a remarkably correct map, but discovered that where we expected to find corrals and camps there were none."

"We went through the main valley to the spot where five smaller ones branch off like the fingers of the hand, and there we explored one by one."

"With no result, Wade says."

"No, sir."

"You found no traces of camps, Surgeon Powell?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"Only in one instance and that was the canyon where you had camped with the man you called the Unknown."

"There were no others?"

"None, and there was no real sign that the valley was inhabited."

"In fact, we found there game in plenty and it was by no means wild."

"We searched each valley thoroughly, every crevice in the rocks and all the canyons and cliffs, but with no result."

"This is remarkable," Buffalo Bill said, and he showed how much he was surprised.

"I thought so, after your having found there a woman and some thirty or forty men, with an unknown man hanged by foes he would not speak of, and who mysteriously disappeared himself."

"Yes, Bill, that valley is a phenomenon of marvels."

"There is something remarkable about it indeed I am compelled to confess," said the colonel.

"We spent one whole week searching the valley, for the grass was plentiful and of the best, the air was delightful and balmy, the waters of the purest and there was an abundance of game of all kinds."

"At last Captain Wade decided to give up the search after one more day going over the valley."

"He gave orders for the men to go in pairs and threes, and to hunt for signs as though they were searching for gold."

"We had found no less than three burying-grounds, and in one of them were all of half a hundred graves, in the others not so many, and none were near to each other."

"The graves all looked to have been made years ago, and these were the sole signs of human beings having dwelt there save the ashes of your camp fire in the canyon, Cody."

"That night the men came into camp as they had left it, all but three."

"These were a sergeant and two men, and they did not return."

"We did not start the next day as proposed, but remained over to hunt for them."

"The search was fruitless for the men were not to be found, and their mysterious disappearance we could not account for in any way."

CHAPTER LVI.

FOILED AT EVERY POINT.

THE Surgeon Scout had told his story in a way that could not but deeply interest both Colonel Merriam and Buffalo Bill, especially when it added another mystery to those that already hung about the Valley of Death.

"You say that you made a thorough

search for the missing men, Doctor Powell?"

"Yes, sir, as thorough as could be made, for I suppose Captain Wade told you that we remained one week longer in the valley merely to search for the sergeant and the two men who were with him."

"Yes, as I said, I had his report, but I wished to hear yours apart from his to see if there might not be some point that we might catch on to give us a clue to the fate of those men."

"I must confess, Colonel Merriam, that I was completely foiled."

"You searched the valley yourself, Powell?"

"Each one in turn, sir."

"There was no reason for the men to desert, for they were all good fellows."

"No reason whatever, sir, and why would men in their senses desert in that region where nothing but death could await them?"

"The sergeant was a man to be thoroughly relied upon even if the men were not, which was not the case."

"No, the men did not leave of their own free will, Doctor Powell."

"I am sure that they did not."

"If killed you would have found some trace of them?"

"It would seem so, sir."

"Was there no way for them to lose their lives there?"

"Yes, sir, many ways, yet it could hardly be that three men would walk over a precipice, into a pit, fall into a stream or be killed by falling rocks, where one might."

"No, it could not be that a like accident would befall these men."

"Which way did they go upon leaving the camp?"

"Well, sir, the men differed in their stories, some saying they had seen them start up one valley, some up another."

"Well, Cody, what is your opinion?" and Colonel Merriam turned to Buffalo Bill who thus far had made no comment upon the strange disappearance of the three soldiers.

"I do not think, sir, that an accident befell them."

"How about deserting their command?"

"I am sure that they did not do that, sir, for they were all Americans, as I recall the sergeant and the two men, and they would not desert."

"Then how do you account for their unaccountable disappearance, Cody?" asked the colonel, who had begun to feel now that the scout had formed some opinion of the manner in which the three soldiers had disappeared in Death's Canyon.

"I can see but one way in which to account for it, Colonel Merriam."

"And that way, Cody?"

"You know, sir, that I found in the valley a number of people?"

"Yes."

"I did not see where I was taken by my captors, and I was even blindfolded by my Mascot, as I called the Girl Guide who saved my life."

"I remember."

"Now I left these people in the valley, and what is more they were led to suppose that I had met my death, for such the girl told me would be the case."

"Well, Cody?"

"They might, or might not have been so led to believe, and if not, why their natural thought would be, not knowing my pledge, that I would come back with a force of soldiers to investigate the valley."

"Naturally."

"Well, sir, so believing they were determined to go into hiding, and that they did so most completely is proven by the fact that Surgeon Powell failed to find any trails there of horses, that the corral was taken away and every evidence was manifested to show that the place had no dwellers in it, in other words that whatever I might tell of the valley, it was false, that there really was no one there."

"You are reasoning well, Bill," said Surgeon Powell.

"Yes, you appear to be on the right trail, Cody, so go on and tell us just what your views are," said Colonel Merriam, more and more interested in the arguments the scout was advancing to show that the dwellers in the Death Valley had not really deserted it.

CHAPTER LVII.

BUFFALO BILL'S PLAN.

URGED by the colonel to continue on in his reasons for the expedition finding no one in the Death Valley, Buffalo Bill said:

"From my knowledge, colonel, of the Death Valley, from all I saw and went through with them, I am sure that those who had made it their homes for some evil purpose have been shrewd enough to find there hiding places almost impossible to discover."

"It must be so, Bill," Frank Powell said.

"Now I would wish no better person to go on the trail than Surgeon Powell, sir, and he had with him Al Huntington and four of the best scouts on the frontier."

"And all of us were baffled," said Frank Powell.

"Yes, all of you, and yet it seems that if we had been together, Surgeon Powell, we could have found those hiding-places."

"Yes, you are never foiled, Cody, when you work with Doctor Powell," Colonel Merriam remarked, while the Surgeon Scout said:

"I now begin to see it in the light that you do, Bill, that the valley was not deserted, but its inhabitants were merely in hiding."

"Yes, I think so, though I may be wrong."

"I am sure that you are not, now that I look it over, for if they had deserted the valley, as you say, why did they wish to give it the appearance of not being occupied?"

"If they did desert, by what trail did they go, when the tracks of their horses could not be found, and they certainly had horses in plenty, from what you told us, Bill?"

"Yes, and they either left the valley temporarily, or they went into hiding there in some of its recesses or caverns."

"I believe, however, that they did not leave the valley."

"I lean to the same belief, Cody, though it is remarkable that Surgeon Powell could not find some trace of them."

"It is, colonel; but he had shrewd men to plot against and they devoted time and labor to covering up their tracks."

"But the three soldiers, Cody?"

"Those who were lost, colonel?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, I think they are the ones who found the retreat of the dwellers in the valley."

"Ah!" said the colonel, excitedly, while Frank Powell cried:

"Bill, you have hit the nail on the head, and no mistake."

"Those three soldiers happened upon the hiding-place of those mysterious valley people."

"Did the men go away from camp on horseback, Surgeon Powell?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"No, on foot, for we gave the horses a rest the last three days we were there in the valley."

"Then the sergeant and his two comrades happened upon the hiding-place of the outlaws."

"And were made prisoners, Cody?"

The colonel asked the question hopefully, yet in doubt.

"I fear, sir, that if they fell into the hands of those outlaws in the Valley of Death there was no mercy shown them."

"This is terrible to contemplate, and this band of outlaws must be run out of that valley if I have to establish a post there," Colonel Merriam said, sternly.

"Colonel Merriam?"

"Yes, Cody."

"I have a favor to ask of you, sir."

"Granted."

"My pledge was for six months, if you remember, I told you."

"Yes."

"Well, sir, I have kept a pretty accurate account of the days, and I have jotted down that five weeks have thus far gone."

"Yes."

"Now, the expedition into the valley making no discovery, those who dwell there, after a few weeks have passed and no return trip is made for another search, will believe that it is given up as a bad case."

"They will think that no one else will venture into the valley, especially after the failure of the expedition and the loss of the

soldiers, and so they will become bold again."

"Yes."

"The balance of my allotted time will soon pass, and then I desire to ask Surgeon Powell to accompany me on a scout into the Death Valley."

"I am with you, Bill, with pleasure," was the surgeon's response.

"What, alone?" asked the colonel.

"Not exactly, sir, for I will go on a scout meanwhile and find the nearest point to the valley where there is grass and water."

"I see."

"To that point I can guide Captain Wade and his troop, with Al Huntington and his four comrades, and then they will be near at hand if needed, and either Surgeon Powell or myself can ride and fetch them."

"All right, Cody, the solving of the mystery of Death Canyon is in your hands, so take your own time and way about it," was Colonel Merriam's response.

CHAPTER LVIII.

FORGING THE CHAIN.

THE return of the expedition under Captain Wade to Death Valley, without success in ferreting out the mysteries of the place, and the most unaccountable disappearance of three of the soldiers who were with the party, added still more to the superstitious dread felt by all for that *terra incognita*.

The soldiers talked it over among themselves and the scouts had their views upon the subject.

Others in the fort also discussed the affair and the result was that the expedition invading Death Valley but added more to its terrors.

Buffalo Bill had little to say upon the subject, shaking his head ominously when questioned by any one regarding his opinion of the affair, for he wished to cater all he could to the dread of all for the Death Valley.

In private he however talked the matter over with Surgeon Powell, and he had made up his mind to go on a lone trail of discovery as soon as he could do so.

There was an ugly feeling of the red-skins, following their defeat which had been so disastrous, and though it made them cautious not to go so far from their villages, it caused them to become more revengeful than ever.

They were prepared for trouble with their pale-face foes, and as scouting bands were prowling about the country, Buffalo Bill and his company of scouts were kept constantly on the alert.

The reports brought in by Cody and his scouts of the movements of the Indians were the means of saving a supply train from capture, and a large quantity of Government cattle from being run off.

Several times had the chief of scouts guided Captain Wade and his troopers to catch an Indian band of raiders, until at last the red-skins were compelled to retreat to their fortresses in the mountains and were glad to make overtures to become friends with their pale-face enemies who beat them at their own games of warfare and cunning.

No sooner had the Indians ceased to give trouble than Buffalo Bill decided to carry out his plan to again enter the Valley of Death, but this time with his border pard Frank Powell.

He fitted himself out for a couple of weeks' outing, carrying a pack-animal with him, and set out to make a circuit of the Valley of Death.

His object was to find the nearest point to it where a company of soldiers could go into a secret camp and remain for a couple of weeks or more.

He went to the northward upon reaching the river where the battle had been fought with the Indians, and followed the banks of the stream for a day.

Then he branched off toward Death Valley and the next night encamped in a valley that was an oasis in the desert, for there was water, grass and timber there in abundance.

He had happened upon the little natural park by accident, never suspecting its existence there, and felt sure that no white man had been there before him.

Leaving his pack horse there the next

day he rode away to see just how near the spot was to the Death Valley.

To his great delight he discovered that he could ride from there to the entrance of the dread valley within half a day easily.

But he did not make this attempt, merely taking his distances from his coming in sight of Volcano Mountain, which he recognized.

His time was not yet up and he would not break his pledge.

So he returned to the little park and remained all night, finding his pack-horse as he had left him.

He shot an antelope and enjoyed his supper and the next day started upon his return for the fort, arriving without any adventure.

Both Colonel Merriam and Surgeon Powell were anxious to learn the result of his going, and he at once visited headquarters and said:

"Colonel, I have discovered the very place for a camp for a troop, sir, and it will require but one day's journey over the desert to get to it, and from there to the Death Valley is not over twenty-five miles' ride."

"This means that you are prepared to start upon your exploration of Death Valley, Cody."

"Yes, sir, for my six months' pledge expires in just five days, and I intend to enter the valley upon the last day of the time agreed upon," was the reply of the scout.

CHAPTER LIX.

THE PLEDGE ENDS.

BUFFALO BILL and Frank Powell sat together in the pleasant quarters of the Surgeon Scout, the evening of his return from his lone trail.

The conversation of the scout with Colonel Merriam had resulted in the sending for Captain Wade, and the interview between the three lasted for an hour or more.

The result of this interview was that Colonel Merriam ordered Captain Wade to take picked men from his troop, sixty in all, with the very best of the horses at the fort, and accompany the scout upon the exploring expedition into the Death Valley.

It was a service that Captain Wade was most anxious to go upon, and he told the colonel that nothing should be left undone to make the expedition a perfect success.

He was to carry pack horses along, with a full camping outfit and supplies to last a month, and not a man should suspect their destination, while Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell would quietly slip away from the fort before the troopers did.

Having received all of his instructions from the colonel, and agreed upon a rendezvous where he should meet Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell, Captain Wade left headquarters to at once begin preparations for the march.

That night Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell arranged their plans, and when they rode away from the fort they carried with them two of their best horses, a complete outfit for camp, and all that they felt would be necessary.

"We must solve the mystery this time, Frank, or they will surely have the laugh on us in the fort," said the scout, while the doctor answered:

"Yes, indeed, Bill, for I must redeem myself for my last total failure as a guide."

"No, it was not a failure as a guide, for you went all over Death Valley, Frank; it was a failure to solve the mystery that lies hidden there."

When ready to depart, Surgeon Powell, accompanied by Buffalo Bill, went to headquarters and bade Colonel Merriam good-by.

"I hate to see you go, and yet I have hopes that you will meet with perfect success," the colonel had said to the two friends as he bade them farewell.

Out of the fort they rode and they went into camp at the rendezvous appointed with Captain Wade.

The next day they were joined by the captain, and when Buffalo Bill saw the troopers he smiled in a satisfied way and said:

"You have got your best men, captain, and they are stripped for work."

"You find us the work, Bill, and we will do it, and if it is to fight, why we will keep Powell busy as a surgeon rather than as a scout."

"I hope my duties will be to look after wounded outlaws, then, Wade," answered Powell.

"Well, we are equipped for a month's stay and have ammunition enough for a siege."

"I have only the best of my men and horses, and we are ready to follow your lead, Cody, whenever you strike the trail."

The trail was struck soon after and by easy marches Buffalo Bill led the way to the oasis he had found in the desert.

It was a ride across the desert from day dawn until sunset to reach it, but as they would have a chance to rest, once they reached the pretty park, Buffalo Bill pushed the horses a little hard to get there, being anxious to pitch camp before nightfall.

As the oasis came in sight over the parched plain the men could hardly believe that it was not a mirage; but at last the outer edge was reached, trees and grass were visible upon each side as they rode along, and a mile further on they came upon a perfect little Eden of beauty, a natural park as beautiful as the grounds about a fine old country seat.

"Why, Cody, this is a gem of a place to camp in," cried Captain Wade, while his officers and men were in ecstasies.

The tents taken from the pack-saddles were quickly pitched, and the horses were turned loose in the rich meadow lands, for there was no danger of their leaving that fertile spot for the desert surrounding the oasis of beauty.

With wood, water and grass in plenty, and well stocked with supplies, the soldiers were in a very genial mood that night in camp, and fearing no danger the timber rung with song and laughter, for discipline was temporarily relaxed and the men felt like schoolboys off on a picnic, instead of cavalrymen on a trail the end of which might be death.

CHAPTER LX.

FERRETS AT WORK—HO FOR DEATH VALLEY.

BUFFALO BILL and Surgeon Powell rested in camp the next day until late in the afternoon, and the scout hit upon a scheme by which a number of miles might be saved, should he or Surgeon Powell have to come in haste after the soldiers.

This was to carry a long pole with them to a pile of rocks some ten miles distant upon the desert, and erect it there.

In that clear atmosphere one can see a very long distance, and a flag run up on the pole would be observed by the sentinel kept constantly upon guard with a field-glass to watch it.

At night a lantern was taken along to run up on the pole, and with either signal set the troopers could hastily saddle up and ride with all haste to meet the scout coming for them, thus saving two hours of time.

Some of the soldiers went along to put up the pole and also the flag and lantern, that those in the park might see how distinctly it could be observed.

It was just sunset when the two scouts left the soldiers at the flagstaff and rode on their way toward the Death Valley.

They preferred to reach the entrance to the valley by night, so that they would have daylight to penetrate into it, for though the former expeditions had made no discoveries of any dwellers there, Buffalo Bill was certain that the outlaws were still there, and Doctor Powell had come to entertain the same opinion.

They reached the hill where the pass was just at midnight, and not sure that a guard was not there dared not continue on in the darkness.

So they halted, unsaddled their horses, spread their blankets and lay down upon the rocky ground to sleep until morning, their horses also, realizing that there was not a blade of grass near, wisely doing likewise.

With the first signs of the eastern sky lighting up with the approach of day the two scouts were awake, their horses saddled and they were ready for work.

They waited until the shadows were lift-

ing and then rode on up to the pass, approaching it with rifles in hand as though they expected to find a guard there.

But they reached the pass without seeing any one, and halted there.

"See there, Bill!"

"Yes, some charred logs."

"Yes, and they were not here when I was last at this spot."

"You are sure?"

"I am."

"That means then that a guard was put here after you left the valley and kept here for a while?"

"That is what it means."

"There has been no fire here for many a long week."

"You are right."

So on they rode and soon halted again.

"Those tracks are of recent date, Frank," and Buffalo Bill pointed to the tracks of horses visible in the trail they were following.

"Yes, and they doubtless send a man here every day or so to take a look over the desert."

"That is my opinion," and they rode on once more.

They wound down into the valley, rode along until they came to the stream and then turned up the small brook, as Buffalo Bill had done before, to go to the canyon.

They reached the canyon to find there the remains of the fire as it had been left long before, and the graves were there, mute witnesses to some dread tragedy enacted there in the past.

"We can go into camp here, Frank, for the Unknown told me that no smoke could be seen when built here against this cliff, and the canyon was shunned by all in the valley."

"I don't wonder, as they were the makers of those graves yonder."

"But this is a good camping-place, for wood and water is plentiful and the horses will be in clover."

"Yes, and we could escape, if cornered, by deserting our horses, while we could hold a dozen or more men at bay from this point if attacked."

"Yes, so this will be our base of supplies and the one starting point to make discoveries of what really is in the valley, for we must go on foot."

"Sure, as we can do far more and not be trailed or seen as easily."

So the horses were staked out up the canyon, a fire was built and the scouts made themselves comfortable, as though anticipating quite a long stay there.

CHAPTER LXI.

A DISCOVERY OF VALUE.

THE plan of Buffalo Bill was for Surgeon Powell and himself to put on moccasins, carry a couple of days' provisions and go out on foot, leaving their horses fenced in in the upper part of the canyon, by stretching their lariats across the narrow space between the cliffs.

Thus left in security the horses could get water and grass at will and not demand the immediate return of their riders to look after their comfort.

All ready for their starting, the two men left the canyon in the afternoon and made their way down into the valley.

Their buckskin-clad feet left no tracks, and they were as cautious as Indians on the war-path.

They reached the larger stream that ran through the valley, turned up it and made their way with the greatest caution where Buffalo Bill had once before been in hiding, and where he had captured Talbot, the outlaw.

Without seeing any one, or else than game, they reached the cliff and sought shelter in the hiding-place where Buffalo Bill had been concealed.

There were the tracks of horses about which told that men had passed and repassed there, and that was just what Buffalo Bill expected.

Spreading their blankets they made themselves comfortable until nightfall, when they ate a cold supper and sallied forth to reconnoiter.

"I am anxious to discover if the corral is at the same place," said Buffalo Bill.

"From whence it had been removed before I got here, Bill?"

"Yes."

"We will soon know."

"There is no danger of meeting these fellows abroad at night, Frank, for they are very superstitious and will not travel unless necessary, so we need not be so cautious as by daylight."

So on they went and after a brisk walk came in sight of the corral.

The snake fence of poles had been replaced and there were half a hundred horses in the inclosure.

"Here is a good haul at least," muttered Buffalo Bill.

"Yes, and they are good animals too."

"They are indeed."

"But were these in the valley when I was last here?"

"Sure."

"But where were they hidden, Bill?"

"That is what we must find out, Frank."

"The men cannot be very far away."

"It would seem not and we will continue on up the valley in search of them."

They went half a mile further and came to where the five valleys branched off from the one large one."

"Now which way, Frank, for I was blindfolded when I passed along here?"

"I searched each valley here thoroughly, and there is yonder on that hill a good hiding-place."

"Better find one down here among the rocks, Frank, so we will be near to get a prisoner should any one come."

"You are right," and the two set to work to find a hiding-place, both realizing that just at that point was the spot for them to lie in ambush during the next day to see who should pass and repass along the valley trail.

They found a secure spot among the rocks and then kept up their reconnoitering as well as they could, but without making any discovery.

At last they retreated to their hiding-place, convinced that the daylight was their best time to make observations and to act.

They sunk to sleep almost immediately, confident that there was no need to keep watch, and the sun was rising when they awoke.

They glanced about them with interest at what they saw.

They were on a point between two of the smaller valleys and looked down the large one.

Fresh tracks were visible going and coming in each valley, and at the place where they all formed the one large vale was the corral of horses.

"Those horses seem to be kept there for the use of any one going up or down any of the valleys, Frank."

"So it seems; but hark!"

They both listened, and the sound of hoofs fell on their ears.

A horseman was coming down the nearest valley at a gallop.

Nearer and nearer resounded the hoof-falls until suddenly there dashed into view the horse and rider.

The two scouts had their rifles ready, but when the rider appeared they lowered them quickly, for it was a woman.

"My Girl Mascot," said Buffalo Bill in a whisper, though the fair rider was all of a hundred yards away from them.

CHAPTER LXII.

TRAILING THE MASCOT.

THE Mascot hesitated at the spot where the valleys joined, looked about her in an interested way and then came slowly along the trail which must bring her within a few yards of where the two scouts were in hiding.

Gazing at her from between crevices of the rocks, Frank Powell said:

"She's a beauty, Bill, and no mistake."

"She is indeed, Frank."

"Shall we hold her up?"

"Not now."

"Why?"

"Await her return, for we may be able to catch a man, or there might be one near her."

"All right, you know best."

The girl was mounted upon a spirited roan, and she sat her saddle with both grace and skill.

She wore a Mexican riding-habit, with silver-embroidered sombrero, and gauntlet gloves.

She carried a rifle swung from her saddle-horn and in a belt about her slender waist was a revolver and knife.

Her form was elegant in outline and her face certainly very beautiful, though it had a sad expression visible even to the two scouts from their hiding-place.

She rode slowly by and so near that Buffalo Bill could have caught her with a lariat.

"That girl is unhappy in the life she leads here, Bill," said Frank Powell as she passed on.

"She looks it."

"But what do you think of her?"

"She is beautiful."

"I do not mean that, but is she wicked?"

"If she is then her face belies her."

"It does."

"Yet she is the ally of outlaws."

"Are they outlaws, Bill?"

"Could they be honest men and good, when they hanged the man I rescued, intended to put me to death and had killed others?"

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten that, and that young girl caused me to feel for a moment that they might not after all be evil-doers."

"Then why hide as they did when you invaded the valley?"

"I have no more to say in their defense, Bill."

"That they are evil men there is no doubt in my mind; but the question is what is that girl to them and why does one with a face like hers ally herself to outlaws?"

"It is another of the mysteries of this most mysterious Valley of Death, Bill."

"Well, we must watch for a man to come along, and, if we can do so without a row, hold him up."

"Certainly, for we may get valuable information from him."

"Very true."

"But if we see no one else then we must catch the girl upon her return."

"Bill."

"Yes, Frank."

The girl knows you by sight well, she has befriended you, extracted from you that six months pledge—

"Well?"

"Now if I were to be seen with you it might set her to flight in alarm, while you alone showing yourself would not frighten her away."

"You mean for me to appear alone to her?"

"Yes."

"I will then, and not so suddenly as to startle her."

"It will be better than to attempt her capture."

"I think so, especially as I remember how she treated me."

"She may befriend you still in helping you unravel this mystery."

"Perhaps."

"But if not?"

"She must know that we have come here to win the game we are playing, and I shall hold her as a prisoner until she yields to our wish that she betray the secret of the valley denizens."

"She has a will of her own, Bill, and may resist."

"True, but she knows what these men are and can make terms for herself by doing as we demand."

The girl meanwhile had passed on out of sight down the valley and the two friends sat patiently awaiting the next turn in the tide, so to speak.

Again, an hour after the girl had gone by, they heard the clatter of hoofs and got ready for action.

Under no circumstances, could they avoid doing so, did they wish to discharge a rifle or revolver, knowing that they would betray their presence to more than they cared to meet.

The horseman soon appeared in sight, but he came down a different valley from the one the girl had ridden out of.

It brought him out at a point two hundred yards from where the scouts were

hiding, and halting a moment he seemed searching for a trail.

Then he found what he was searching for and went off at a gallop down the main valley.

He was following the trail of the horse ridden by the girl, and he was none other than the masked chief of the band dwelling in the Valley of Death.

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE EAVESDROPPERS.

It was an anxious time for Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell, though both men were cool and showed no expression in their faces of the danger they had to confront.

They both knew that at the fort Colonel Merriam was watching and waiting for their return with a report of their success.

They understood well how anxiously Captain Wade and his men were awaiting some tidings of them.

Though apparently near, the troops were nearly a day's ride distant.

All that they had to face, from the knowledge that they had come into the very midst of the mysterious Valley of Death, arose before them.

But they talked together in even tones, their faces were not pallid with fear and they calmly awaited the outcome of their venture.

Surgeon Powell had remarked upon the magnificent appearance of the chief, and both wondered why he had so rapidly followed upon the trail of the Girl Guide.

A couple of hours passed away and then the girl came in sight upon her return.

Both Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell were glad to see this, and that she had in some way missed the chief.

As she drew nearer Buffalo Bill was preparing to step out and confront her, when suddenly Surgeon Powell uttered a cry of warning.

The scout shrunk back behind the rocks, while the surgeon said:

"See there!"

He pointed down the valley, and there came the chief, his horse on a run.

They dared not now allow the girl to see them.

She had gotten almost opposite to their position when a loud call caused her to turn quickly in her saddle.

She glanced behind her to see the chief, and for a moment she seemed undecided whether to ride rapidly on or halt.

Then she muttered, and the two scouts distinctly heard her words:

"It might as well be now as another time."

"I will wait."

She turned her horse about, and the animal now stood not fifty feet from the position occupied by the scouts.

On came the chief, having slackened his pace from a run to a canter when she halted for him.

He soon drew near to her and said, somewhat petulantly:

"You did deign to halt for me, then?"

"Oh, yes."

"Will you ride on with me to my home?"

"No, I wish to talk with you here, for I have that to say to you I care not for others to hear."

"As you please."

"I have followed you for several hours, for I had hoped to head you off before you went down the valley."

"What have you to say to me, chief?"

"I need not repeat to you that I love you."

"No, for I do not care to hear it."

"What is your cause of hatred against me?"

The girl laughed bitterly and then replied: "Do you forget that you are a natural villain, while I still love honor and truth, in spite of having been forced to live in this vile spot among men who are lawless, murderers, yes, and thieves?"

"Be careful how you speak," and the man spoke with anger.

"Why should I when I speak of the men whose leader you are?"

"I am chief here, as you know, girl."

"Oh, yes, you are chief, yet I am queen, and the men hold allegiance to me alike with you."

"The more reason that you should be my wife."

"Oh, no; life to me is bitter enough without such a fate as that."

"You can leave here when you will if you pledge yourself to marry me."

"The temptation to leave is not so great as to cause me to do that."

"Why?"

"Well, as you ask the question, let me tell you that you won my friendship under false pretenses."

"Pretending to be the devoted brother of one I loved, I trusted you, and with my father came with you to where we fell into your power."

"I came, believing the one I loved to be dying, and instead I discovered that he had been ruined by you."

"I found that you had destroyed his honor, had made him an outlaw, and caused him to fly for his life."

"Then, when I was in your power, you demanded that I should learn to love you."

"You gave me two years in which to make up my mind and inveigled my poor father into giving his consent by promising him a half-interest in your fortune."

"Gulled by you, and blinded by the glitter of gold, he was glad to remain here, all the while trying to believe you were not so wicked as the men knew you to be."

"But thank Heaven, I held firm and refused your demand that I should marry you, and to-day I still am free, and not wedded to the vilest of wretches, the one who broke into my young life and robbed it of my happiness by destroying the one whom I loved."

"Then you refuse to go from here and marry me?"

"Most emphatically I do."

"Then I shall show you, girl, that I have the power to force you to obey," was the savage response of the man.

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE THREAT.

WHEN the two scouts, hearing all that was said, expected to see the young girl show terror at the threat of the outlaw chief, instead she merely laughed in a sarcastic manner and said:

"Your threats have no terror for me?"

"Why?"

"Well, I am armed, and so I am able to protect myself from any coward that crosses my path."

"You dare call me coward?"

"To threaten a woman shows that I do not make any mistake in doing so."

"Girl, you drive me mad with your bitter tongue, heaping abuse when I would hear only words of love from you."

"Bah! do not talk like a fool, chief, for I tell you that I shall go my way, you to go yours."

"You know that the time has come when we can leave this valley?"

"Yes."

"You know that I have a fortune, that I can give you a life in foreign lands as luxurious as the queen whose name you bear?"

"I can live without your aid, chief."

"And you will go from here and our paths part in life?"

"Yes."

"I say no."

"And I say yes."

"I told you that I could force you to love me."

"You can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink, is a very truthful old adage," the girl said cuttingly.

"You love your father?" he suddenly asked.

"Ah, yes, but too well."

"With his sad love of gold that has made him ally himself to you, to allow me to live in the atmosphere of lawlessness, I do love my father, truly and devotedly," and she spoke most earnestly.

"You would not see him die?"

"Heaven have mercy, no!"

"Then hear what I have to say."

"What would you do?" she asked excitedly and in alarm.

"I would say that I love you to that extent that I would commit any crime to win you."

"I love you so dearly that I cannot give you up.

"Marry me and I will win your love in time by a life of devotion, but refuse and I must force you to become my wife."

"You cannot."

"I say I can, for I shall govern you through your father."

"My father is willing, Heaven forgive him, to see me marry you, but he would never force me, nor allow you to do so."

"I can force you through your love for him."

"Ah!" and again she wore a frightened look.

"I will reveal to you, Queen, that if you do not vow to marry me, when we reach the nearest settlement where we can find a clergyman, I will put your father to death with no more mercy than I have caused other men to die."

"My God!"

"Would you do sin so vile?"

"I would, and from my love for you."

"You would carry out this awful threat?"

"Within the hour will I carry my threat into execution, unless you give me your vow that you will become my wife, and with your father dead you will still be in my power."

"Now, girl, you know just what I would do and I mean every word that I utter."

The girl's face was bowed now, her form quivered and she seemed deeply moved.

At last she said:

"I am one who if I give my word will keep it."

"I well know that, Queen."

"Then give me ten days to consider."

"No, for you know that we leave here within the week, that we are all ready, for it will not do to longer take chances of remaining here, now that we know Buffalo Bill was not killed in making his escape, as we all supposed."

"Give me five days then."

"I will not."

"Three days," and the girl pleaded earnestly.

"I will not."

"One day."

"No."

"You will not let me think it over?"

"No, you must decide now and here."

"But I cannot."

"You must."

"Come, I will give you just one minute in which to decide, and then if you refuse I shall ride for the retreat with all speed and when you arrive you will find your father a dead man."

"Come!"

"You have just one minute in which to make up your mind," and the chief took a gold watch from his pocket as he uttered the words that were such a cruel threat to the young girl who was in his power.

CHAPTER LXV.

IN THE TOILS.

BUFFALO BILL and Surgeon Powell had heard every word uttered.

They crouched down in their place of hiding and watched and waited.

Either could have killed the chief with a pistol-shot, but they knew not what the result of the report might be.

At last, as they saw that the chief and the girl were too deeply occupied to observe them, they decided to act.

The chief sat on his horse with his back to the rocks.

The girl faced them, but her head was bowed now in her hands.

Buffalo Bill at once acted then and promptly.

He glided as noiselessly as a panther, and from among the rocks, crept up behind the outlaw and with a stroke of his revolver-barrel dealt him a severe blow on the back of the head just as Surgeon Powell sprung forward and grasped the rein of his horse.

The blow caused the chief to reel and fall from his saddle, and at the sound the girl looked up and uttered a cry of mingled alarm and surprise.

The cry had hardly left her lips, however, when, in the tall form bending over the fallen chief she recognized Buffalo Bill.

"Oh, Buffalo Bill!" she cried, in a tone of joy.

The scout raised his sombrero quickly and went on binding his prisoner, who was showing signs of returning consciousness.

He had already disarmed him and was using his own lariat for bonds.

He also took the precaution to put a rope gag in his mouth and dragged him into the retreat among the rocks and left him just as he turned his wild eyes upon the scout, who had torn from his face the half mask he wore.

Surgeon Powell meanwhile had held on to the outlaw's horse and at the same time spoken a soothing word to the young girl, who was all unnerved.

But she recovered herself and said quickly:

"From what have you and your friend not saved me, Buffalo Bill?"

"We heard enough to know what you have suffered, miss, and we came here hoping to save you, for I was sure that you could not be bad."

"You did not keep your promise?"

"Yes, the six months were up yesterday, and then I returned, along with my friend Surgeon Powell of the army."

"You returned only yesterday?"

"Yes, miss."

"That cannot be."

"Yet it is true."

"Then who has killed secretly the half-dozen men of the band in the past two months?"

"I could not tell you."

"Do you tell the truth, Buffalo Bill?"

Before Cody could answer the Surgeon Scout said:

"I can vouch that he does, miss, for we came to this valley only yesterday, and together; but nearly five months ago I was here and spent two weeks in exploring these surroundings."

"Yes, I recognize you now, and you came with a cavalry command?"

"I did."

"And found nothing?"

"We found nothing."

"I saw you from my place of hiding and at first I thought you were Buffalo Bill, and then knew that I was mistaken."

"The men saw you too."

"Where were you, may I ask?"

"We were in hiding."

"In this valley?"

"Yes, for we have hiding-places no one could find."

"You are not wicked, I know, so why did you not betray your band?"

"For the same reason that I exacted a pledge from Buffalo Bill not to come here again under six months."

"What was that?"

"Because my father, I shame to say, is one of the band, and I had hoped that in that time he would have left here, and then, if you returned, you could capture the outlaws."

"Then they are outlaws?"

"Oh, yes, there is no need to disguise it now."

"Yet I must say to you that my father was deceived into coming here, as I was."

"We can well believe that, after all we have overheard," said Buffalo Bill.

"But you must go from here at once, for your lives will be the forfeit."

"Quick! some one of the band may come along at any minute, and you are lost."

"You must go, for there are some twenty desperate men now in this valley."

"And we have three-score brave troopers not very far away," was Buffalo Bill's response, and he added:

"No, miss, we have come to stay."

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE SECRET TOLD.

THE young girl eyed Buffalo Bill closely as he spoke, and then said:

"You have troops near?"

"Yes, I can get them here by to-morrow's sunrise."

"Then let me beg you to go after them at once, and then I will feel content."

"Alone you two will be sacrificed."

"Surgeon Powell?"

"Yes, Bill."

"Will you mount this horse of the chief and ride with all speed for Captain Wade,

while I go into the hiding-place there and hold the prisoner until your return?"

"In the mean time I will learn from this young lady just where to find this band, so that we can go at once upon your return with the men and attack them."

"I will be off at once; but will not the chief be missed?"

"The young lady must explain his absence in some way, Frank."

"Then I am off," and Surgeon Powell leaped into the saddle and was about to dash away when the girl said:

"Take the chief's hat and mask, yes, and coat instead of your own, sir, in case you should meet any of the men down the valley, though I do not believe one of them is away from the upper camps."

As soon as the girl had made the suggestion Frank Powell had acted upon it, and the exchange was quickly made and away went the Surgeon Scout down the valley in a sweeping gallop.

"Now, Buffalo Bill, I wish to make terms with you," said the young girl when the doctor had left.

"I am willing, miss, for I owe my life to you."

"Do not put it upon that basis, only upon the fact that you are to kill, or capture this band of outlaws and get considerable booty."

"All right, what are your wishes, miss?"

"A compromise."

"Name it, please."

"My father is nominally one of this band."

"Yes."

"He was the one who allowed you to escape, and, as he supposed, administered the oath to you in the cavern."

"I thought as much."

"He was a good man until he was inveigled here, and then, tempted by the glitter of gold, he yielded to the chief's wishes and became his partner."

"Well?"

"He has never raised a hand against a human life, and has tried to protect unfortunates who have fallen into the power of the chief, as I have also done."

"I can believe that."

"My father now has three of the soldiers whom Surgeon Powell led some months ago, hiding them away where the chief believes them to be dead."

"Thank Heaven for that."

"Yes, they ran into one of our hiding-places and were seized."

"The chief sentenced them to death, but my father, pretending to carry out the command, kept them in hiding, though prisoners in irons."

"I certainly am delighted to hear this, miss."

"For this reason I beg for the freedom of my father and myself."

"You shall have your wish, I pledge you my word."

"But this is not all."

"Well?"

"I wish our share of the fortune here, for my father has worked hard to get it—yes, and sinned for it, too."

"You mean the booty the outlaws have gotten in their robberies?"

"Oh, no, for what these have robbed people of now and then, amounts to nothing."

"What do you mean, then?"

"I mean that there is a gold mine in this valley, which the chief and his men have been working for several years."

"The chief discovered it years ago, but it needed machinery to get at it, and he had no money to buy it with."

"He therefore made up his mind to get money at all hazards, and he plotted the ruin of a noble man to do so."

"That man was one I loved with all my heart, and was the chief's brother."

"He was a paymaster in the army, and he was led into a trap by the chief and made a prisoner, and his money taken from him."

"As he hated him for winning my love, he said, he got his revenge by impersonating his brother as paymaster, having his men attack the stage-coach and pretend to rob him, the supposed paymaster, while he afterward spread the report that Captain Talbot Turpin, of the army, had robbed the Government and fled."

"When released from his imprisonment, Talbot Turpin found himself a ruined man,

and went Heaven only knows where; in fact, I fear he took his own life, for he found that I had gone off with his brother.

"This I did do, with my father, but it was, as he told me, to take me to my lover, who was badly wounded.

"In this way he got us into his power, and kept us here, for here is where we came.

The money he robbed the Government of, taken from poor Talbot, he bought the necessary machinery with, and ox-trains brought it here.

"Those whom he had to get to help him were sworn in as his band, and they have all a share in the mines, which have yielded most liberally.

"That which belongs to the outlaws is your prize, I know, but I ask for what is my father's, for then I will be able to search the world over and find Talbot Turpin, if alive, and clear his name of dishonor."

Buffalo Bill listened with rapt attention to all the young girl said and then remarked, as he now saw clearly through the mystery:

"I can refuse my Mascot nothing, and you and your father shall have your own.

"But now let me ask you, if, to keep the secret from being found out, the chief has killed those who came into this valley?"

"He has, though he believes that some one else held the secret years ago, and massacred a wagon-train of emigrants that came here."

"That accounts for the graves in the canyon, then?"

"Yes; but now tell me again that you have not been the one to kill so mysteriously seven of the band of outlaws of late?"

"I have not."

"Then who has done this killing?"

"I cannot tell you indeed."

"The chief has thought that it was a plot among the men to kill off each other that the share of gold might be larger for those who remained."

"It may be the case, in fact it must be."

"For that reason we were to leave here within a few days; but thank Heaven you are here to end this life of crime, for those outlaws are one and all guilty of the vilest crimes," said the girl earnestly.

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE UNKNOWN UNMASKED.

"Now will you remain here with the chief, until your soldiers come?" asked the young girl of Buffalo Bill.

"I will, and he will be safe."

"I do not doubt that, and I will excuse his absence as best I can, but I must tell my father all."

"You can trust him?"

"Oh, yes, and he will be a happy man."

"But when the soldiers come?"

"Well?"

"Are you to be my Mascot still?"

"Will you be my guide to the retreat of the outlaws?"

"I'll tell you what I will do."

"Yes."

"The outlaws will not go abroad at night, and so I will come here for you."

"That is a good idea."

"You can tie the chief so he cannot escape, and then go with me until I show you the secret retreats, and they are not as far from here as you think."

"The men will be there?"

"Oh, yes, and I'll show you where you will find my father and myself."/>

"That will be well."

"Now I must return, but expect me soon after dark," and with this she leaped into her saddle and rode away.

She had not been gone long before Buffalo Bill saw a man coming up the valley.

The scout was all attention at once, peering out from his hiding-place to which he had retreated.

To make it the safer he gagged the chief more securely, and then watched the coming man.

He came on cautiously and as he drew nearer Buffalo Bill saw that it was none other than his unknown comrade, the one whom he had brought back to life after cutting him down from the tree.

He was about to go out and meet him when the man came straight toward his hiding-place.

A few seconds more and he came in behind

the rocks and was face to face with Buffalo Bill.

He dropped his hand upon his revolver, but recognized the scout at once and cried:

"Great God! you here Buffalo Bill?"

"Yes, I—"

But ere the scout could say more there came a deep groan from the bound and gagged chief, and turning upon him Buffalo Bill thought he was dying.

The Unknown also saw him then and cried savagely:

"At last we meet again, my brother."

"But for the fact that I see you this scout's prisoner, and know that you will hang for your crimes, I would be tempted to stain my hands with your blood, be you to me what you may."

The scout had removed the gag from the mouth of the chief, and there came the words in gasps:

"The dead has arisen!"

"You are—"

"I am no ghost, Hugh Turpin, but flesh and blood."

"You had me hanged, but this brave man came along in time to save my life."

"You dishonored me before the world, made me appear like a thief, and, when at last I escaped from you and could return, I dared not until I had proof of my innocence."

"I dared not let this noble man carry me back to the fort, so I deceived him and escaped from him."

"But I remained in this valley to hunt down your band and some day show that I was not guilty."

"Now I will force the truth from you."

"If you will set me free I will confess all the wrong I have done you."

"No, you are not my prisoner."

"There is no need of further proof, Captain Turpin, for I know you to be that officer, than can be given by the lady you love and her father, and whose names I do not know."

"Ah! Queen Kent and her father?"

"Yes, they are here, and in this man's power."

"They are no longer, sir, and Mr. Kent and his lovely daughter are to go free from here, I pledge you my word."

"But I must gag this man again, as some one may pass."

The scout again gagged the chief, and then sat down with Captain Turpin to hear the story he had to tell, for he said:

"I had begun my work of revenge, scout, and already had faced seven of the outlaw band, watching my chance and catching them alone."

"I did not assassinate them, but met them as a man face to face, and mine was the better aim, guided by just revenge."

For a long while the two so strangely met talked together, and at last the shadows of night crept over the valley.

Then, true to her promise, Queen Kent came to meet Buffalo Bill, and it was the happiest hour of the scout's life when he was able to tell her that her lover was alive and near her, and then he called him out to meet the maiden.

Of that meeting we must not speak, save than to say that Captain Turpin told Buffalo Bill that the joy he then felt repaid him for all that he had suffered in the past.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

CONCLUSION.

It was not daybreak when Surgeon Powell guided Captain Wade and his troopers up to the spot where Buffalo Bill was awaiting them.

The scout hastily explained to Captain Wade the situation and presented him to Captain Turpin, whom he had never met, telling him his story.

Then he told how he had been led by his Mascot to the recent retreats of the miners, and he would guide the soldiers there.

These retreats were on the inaccessible hill-tops, except through caves in the cliffs, entrances to the caverns being concealed by painted canvas to look like rock, thus cleverly throwing all off the track who reached for them.

To the hill-top horses and all had been taken by the outlaws, for once up there a valley was found upon the summit of the range, and a dozen acres in size.

So Buffalo Bill led the troopers to the

attack, up through the caverns, and the outlaws, just at daybreak, saw the Boys in Blue dashing into their retreat.

They fought desperately, however, and only a few of them were taken alive.

Mr. Kent and his daughter were found elsewhere, and after a halt in the valley of several days the soldiers started upon their return for the fort, accompanied by the man who had been the partner of the outlaw chief.

The gold found was not so much as was expected, and as the outlaw chief at least had a claim to that, he gave to his brother his share to restore to the Government the amount he had taken from him.

On the way back to the fort the chief, and his lieutenant, whose name was also Talbot, attempted to escape and were shot by the sentinels on duty, and thus their careers were ended by a bullet instead of a rope.

In due time the command arrived at the fort, and Colonel Merriam was glad to know the successful ending of a red trail, and that his friend Talbot Turpin was not the guilty man he had been accused of being.

He lost no time in sending the prisoners off for trial, but was sorry not to be able to keep Captain Turpin, Mr. Kent and Queen at the fort for a long visit.

The paymaster sent in his resignation, with a full statement of facts, and then went with Mr. Kent and his daughter back to their old home, where the lovers were soon after united in marriage.

As for those at the fort who have figured in my story, they still live, honored and admired by their fellow countrymen for their deeds of daring on the wild frontier, while praises are sung, in every military camp, of Buffalo Bill and the Surgeon Scout, heroes of the plains who unearthed the secret of the Valley of Death.

THE END.

Buffalo Bill's Most Famous Ride.

WILLIAM F. CODY, "Buffalo Bill," made a remarkable ride in Kansas in 1868, when the State was comparatively unknown. We are not compelled to take the famous scout's word for his feat, for General Phil Sheridan has left the record in his autobiography. That commander started out in midwinter to punish the troublesome red-skins and got as far as Hays City. The following extract from Sheridan's memoirs tells the story of the remarkable ride:

"Mr. William F. Cody, Buffalo Bill, was first brought to my notice by distinguishing himself in bringing me an important dispatch from Fort Larned to Fort Hays, a distance of sixty-five miles, through a section infested with Indians. The dispatch informed me that the Indians near Larned were preparing to decamp, and this intelligence required that certain orders should be carried to Fort Dodge, ninety-five miles south of Hays. This, too, being a particularly dangerous route—several couriers having been killed on it—it was impossible to get one of the various Petes, Jacks or Jims hanging around Hays City to take this communication.

"Cody, learning of the strait I was in, manfully came to the rescue, and proposed to make the trip to Dodge, though he had just finished his long and perilous ride from Larned. I gratefully accepted his offer, and after a short rest he mounted a fresh horse and hastened on his journey, halting but once to rest on the way, and then only for an hour, the stop being made at Coon Creek, where he got another mount from a troop of cavalry. At Dodge he took some sleep, and then continued on to his own post—Fort Larned—with more dispatches.

"After resting at Larned he was again in the saddle with tidings for me at Fort Hays, General Hazen sending him this time, with word that the villagers had fled to the south of the Arkansas. Thus, in all, Cody rode about 350 miles in less than sixty hours, and such an exhibition of endurance and courage at that time of the year and in such weather was more than enough to convince me that his services would be extremely valuable in the campaign, so I retained him at Fort Hays till the battalion of the 5th Cavalry arrived, and then made him chief of scouts."

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Coming out of the Wild West when what is now farms, ranches and cattle ranges was the feeding-ground of the buffalo, the home of the untamed Indian, and the haunt of the outlaw—he is, literally, a Child of the Plains—the Knight of the Border—the typical Man of the West.

In early boyhood his father was murdered in the so-called "Kansas war," when ruffians overran Eastern Kansas, and murder, pillage and

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violence held wild riot. It was then the boy so asserted himself that before he was fifteen years of age, Billy Cody was noted for his nerve, and for his readiness for any dangerous service.

From one daring or arduous performance to another he so progressed in public estimation that when he was eighteen years old he was known from the Missouri to the Red River of Texas as one of the best shots, most expert horsemen, most successful hunters, most daring scouts, most skilled Indian-fighters, most sagacious guides, and most fearless Pony Express carrier in all the land—as the romances from his own inimitable pen and our other noted writers [see list] most impressively attest.

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